



The Story of our VCH Spiritual Care Heritage

Deep Roots

Our heritage is a history that is both ancient and contemporary. The story is one of deep, faithfulness, courage and hope. Reflecting on this legacy can be inspiring.

Humanity is as spiritual as it is physical, and so is healthcare. When faced with the unknown, spiritual curiosity often occurs, allowing one to explore or even transcend the present. This is especially so during times of illness. First Nations people practiced spirituality as part of their healthcare in the territory now known as Vancouver long before any contact with Europeans. They supported the sick, wounded, and dying with ways of knowing as well as with ways of mystery. So, healing in Vancouver was at its ancient beginnings spiritual in nature.

Unfortunately, settlers largely overlooked the healing traditions of the Indigenous peoples of the region. Europeans did however bring their own medicine, and the establishment of Vancouver General Hospital brought hope of new treatments. In 1906, its location saw the start of 24-hour health care service. Within the hospital walls, healing, recovery, and medical advancement became a most welcome experience for Vancouver residents. In those early days, doctors were frequently guided by faith. They dedicated themselves to providing the best care they could by, blending medical expertise with a deep sense of duty to their patients.

Three Eras of Spiritual Care Practice at VCH

There have been three overlapping eras of patient spiritual care at VGH, which eventually became part of Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH). The first era focussed on the felt religious needs, such as prayer, met by local pastors, priests, and rabbis. The second era saw the development of organized religious chaplaincy supported by denominations. The third era of spiritual intervention focussed on professional spiritual care. In the 2nd half of the 20th century this developed from religious counseling into interfaith supervised clinical pastoral education (CPE - later termed "clinical psycho-spiritual education"). Although no longer religiously based, understanding religion as it factors into patient care, has remained crucial as has an appreciation for the power of religious rituals in helping patients of various religions to cope with the spiritual challenges of their illness.

The Earliest Beginnings of Hospital Spiritual Care at VGH

Over the years, hundreds of Vancouver clergy, lay members, and spiritual care practitioners have continually been a part of the healing team. However, one person stands out for the unanimous high regard in which he was held by medical staff, nurses and the public alike for over 30 years of hospital service, alongside an even longer track record of community work. His name was Cecil C. Owen. In 1922 the mayor of Vancouver and the director of VGH, Dr. Malcolm MacEachern (later known as the father of the modern-day hospital) asked Cecil to serve as "The Host", which was to be a non-sectarian supervising chaplaincy position for the



over 1000 bed hospital. A former World War 1 chaplain and well-known local clergyperson, Cecil symbolized endurance and hope to war veterans, patients, staff, and even the wider community. He recognized the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in war veterans long before it was recognized as an actual condition and was able to make a significant difference in its treatment. Cecil was known to search out hospitalized veterans late into the night, offering them comfort and assistance in coping with their symptoms. In 1936, he was one of three religious leaders who spoke to over 100,000 people at the Vimy Ridge memorial dedication in France—an event regarded as a defining moment in the development of Canada’s national identity.

Balancing Clinical and Traditional Influences on Spiritual Care within VCH

In the late 1960s, CPE became standard practice at VGH. This education was informed by hundreds of medical science studies validating the role of spiritual health in healing. Today’s Spiritual Care practice still meets the felt needs of patients with comfort and solace but is now informed by decades of clinical insights gleaned by the profession over decades of research and professional practice. We are likewise informed by a respect for Indigenous elders and the spirituality practiced by their people. In this way, we recognize the value of ancient practices as well as more recent clinical perspectives.

Interfaith Spiritual Health Practitioners qualified according to standards set by the Ministry of Health now serve persons of all religious and nonreligious perspectives. They may be found in all 3 communities of care that comprise VCH, and serve alongside of Spiritual Care interns, fellows and multifaith clergy assigned by their respective denominations. Spiritual Health Practitioners, (formerly called chaplains) have master’s degrees and are trained in many hundreds of hours of supervised clinical practice. Practitioners come from various religious and ethnic groups, including all major religions and some are non-religious. All are committed to collaborating with health care staff to assure the best possible patient outcomes.

However, all the expertise in the world is empty without faithfulness, courage and hope. These qualities have been exhibited by Spiritual Health Practitioners for over 100 years at VGH and subsequently throughout VCH. This **was especially evident during the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020**. Spiritual Care not only faithfully maintained its presence with patients, families, and staff throughout those challenging times but expanded its supports despite rapidly changing conditions.

Today, VCH Spiritual Health Practitioners attend to spiritual needs associated with such diverse health challenges as emergencies, surgeries, trauma, infectious diseases, psychiatric illness, rehabilitation, complicated aging, end of life and community health crises. Spiritual health practitioners serve patients, family members, and health care workers. They seek to reduce spiritual distress, such as anxiety and loss of hope, while assisting with meaning making and providing a presence that transforms isolated experience into a shared sense of transcendence.

Building on the Past We Move into the Future

We see our spiritual ancestors as a cloud of witnesses encouraging us to keep faith with the past through exercising courage in the present. In this sense, we are not alone. As we carry our heritage with us into the future from the southern reaches of Richmond to the Northernmost regions of Qathet, we do so mindful of the VCH core values : we care for everyone, we are always learning, and we strive for better results. These values are aligned with our regional program’s 3 corresponding values of compassion, curiosity, and collaboration. In this way we support the mission of VCH in our own distinct way, as we have since the doors of its first hospital opened.