

## **The Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists**

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The Special Interest Group was set up in 1999 to provide a forum for psychiatrists to explore the influence of the major religions, which shape the cultural values and aspirations of psychiatrist and patient alike. The spiritual aspirations of persons not identifying with any one particular faith are held to be of no less importance, as well as the viewpoint of those who hold that spirituality is independent of religion.

The meetings are designed to enable colleagues to investigate and share without fear of censure the relevance of spirituality to clinical practice. It is hoped that in due course the Special Interest Group will contribute a framework of ideas of general interest to the College, stimulating discussion and promoting an integrative approach to mental health care. For patients, there is the need to help the service user feel supported in being able to bring spiritual concerns to the fore.

Over recent years, there have been a number of calls for an approach encompassing mind, body and spirit. The College was urged to do so by its patron, HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES in 1991. PROFESSOR ANDREW SIMS raised the issue again in 1993 in his Presidential Valedictory Lecture, as did PROFESSOR JOHN COX, the incumbent president of the College, at the Annual College meeting of that same year. In 1997, the Archbishop of Canterbury addressed the Joint Conference of the College and the Association of European Psychiatrists. There has been growing interest in the series of Religion and Psychiatry Conferences held at the Institute of Psychiatry and other regional individual initiatives have been taking place. In 1998, a survey by the Mental Health Foundation revealed that over fifty per cent of service users hold religious or spiritual beliefs, which they see as important in helping them cope with mental illness, and highlighted the need expressed by many patients for greater encouragement in discussing such concerns with the psychiatrist.

Spirituality can be as broad as 'the essentially human, personal and interpersonal dimension, which integrates and transcends the cultural, religious, psychological, social and emotional aspects of the person' or more specifically 'concerned with soul or spirit' (the term 'spiritual' is now included in DSM IV under the heading of 'other conditions that may be a focus of clinical attention'). The Special Interest Group has a correspondingly varied and wide-ranging agenda, including consideration of protective factors that spiritually sustain the patient in crisis and otherwise contribute to mental health.

Spiritual values have a universality which brings together all involved in mental health care. The Special Interest Group supports the exploration of such fundamental questions as the purpose and meaning of life, which are so important for mental health, as well as the problem of good and evil and a wide range of specific experiences invested with spiritual meaning including birth, death and near-death, mystical and trance states and varieties of religious experience. Both pathological and normal human experiences are considered in order to understand better the overlap and difference between the two.

The Special Interest Group has been growing steadily and has 220 members to date. Meetings are held every three months, a newsletter is being produced and a yearly conference event is planned.

*Dr. Andrew Powell is Chair of this Royal College of Psychiatrists Group. Other Network members on the committee include Dr. Peter Fenwick, Dr. Julian Candy and Dr. Larry Culliford.*