

BOOK REVIEW

Religions, Culture and Healthcare: A Practical Handbook for Use in Healthcare Environments.

Susan Hollins

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Hollins (working as one of the four lead chaplains appointed by the NHS to take forward the modernisation agenda for spiritual healthcare) brings together a wealth of 'scattered information'. She questions how often our own narrow thinking, lack of cultural understanding and prejudices lead to poor healthcare. She suggests that 'by engaging in a journey of discovery about other cultures, we will become more tolerant and understanding of others' which will 'deepen our pastoral care as well as our clinical care.' An important area, which she comments on, is the belief system that illness is related to judgement. Hindu people, for example, believe that 'illness is thought to be punishment for wrong behaviour in a former life' For Islam, 'illness and suffering are regarded as a means of purification and as a punishment for wrongdoing' and for some pagans, illness is 'a trial set by their Gods on their road to enlightenment.' Hollins therefore draws out the importance of education for healthcare workers on belief systems and culture, and cites this as the reason for her book.

Religion however is not Hollins' only concern. She speaks of 'spirituality' being important to those who do not adhere to a traditional belief system. The importance of 'relationships', 'emotions' and 'work' may indeed have an impact on an individual's healthcare journey, and may require 'spiritual care'. Hollins lists a number of elements to understanding pastoral care of an individual including 'feelings and any beliefs or philosophical framework for living' and 'search for and discovery of meaning'. She therefore concludes that to define spirituality too narrowly would be wrong. Referring to the chaplaincy/spiritual healthcare, she positively notes the coming together of the different faith communities to be in ongoing debate with regard to best spiritual care. She also notes the importance of patient and public involvement ensuring that a wider audience can be heard. However, although there are differing views with regard to the damaging/beneficial possibilities of religion in healthcare, Hollins suggests that the main religions should not be 'ignored as being irrelevant to the age in which we live.'

Much of the book is centred on looking at the culture and beliefs of many religions. Each chapter is dedicated to drawing out the central beliefs of the faith followed by very clear guidelines on how culture, belief and healthcare come together. To give some examples, Hollins notes:

The Islamic faith - men are believed to be the protectors of women and should be consulted about any treatment for their wives or sisters.

The Buddhist faith - death is a very important time and relatives may wish the body to remain where it is until a priest is able to attend.

The Christian faith - it is important for many to have their baby baptised/christened.

The Hindu faith - a woman may experience tremendous guilt following miscarriage or stillbirth as the Hindu emphasis is on a woman's fertility and ability to bear children.

The Jewish faith - an Orthodox husband will not touch his wife during childbirth, as it is believed that blood loss makes her unclean.

The Sikh Faith - 'Accommodation in single-sex wards is essential.'

This book would make an excellent resource for medical, nursing and indeed any healthcare worker. I believe it meets its purpose in providing a clear understanding of religions and culture, and how this relates to healthcare, which would only enhance the religious and spiritual care of all people.