Advocate Health Care recently completed a system-wide survey of more than 2000 physicians and nurses regarding the role that spirituality and religious beliefs play in their delivery of patient care. By learning how caregivers incorporate their spirituality into the care that they provide, Advocate hopes to identify barriers and provide resources to help make spirituality a greater part of the patient—caregiver experience.

The survey defined spirituality broadly as “the experience of meaning and purpose in our lives through our relationship with God, people, nature and other things that nurture the human spirit. Spirituality may be expressed through religious beliefs, stories and practices.”

Doctors and nurses overwhelmingly agreed that spirituality should and does play a role in their interaction with patients. Eighty eight per cent of physicians and nurses agreed that spirituality was important and 86% thought that their personal understanding of spirituality influenced the way they delivered patient care.

(continued on page 2)
Among the ways that doctors and nurses expressed their spirituality in their care of patients were:

- Taking time to actively listen (78%)
- Providing physical support (68%)
- Consulting with chaplains (47%)
- Sharing personal experiences with patients (39%)

The biggest barriers they identified to incorporating spirituality were too little time and not enough knowledge and/or training to know how to engage spiritual issues appropriately.

Rabbi Samuel E. Karff, adjunct professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston says, “People have the need for a sacred vocation. If your work is just a job, it is hard to incorporate it into that résumé that makes up the meaningful life.”

Advocate hopes to improve patients’ experience by empowering medical staff to use their own spiritual resources in attending to the patients and families for whom they care.

Self-Care for Nurses

During 2002 and 2003, nurse managers from all of Advocate’s eight hospitals went through a two day self-care retreat. Funded by the Prince Charitable Trust and led by Advocate board member Mary Ann McDermott and consultant Patricia Novick, the program focused on breath, water, conscious eating, movement, touch, creativity, rest and relationships. Nursing is a high stress occupation and self-care is a challenge for many caregivers. But participants found that calming their own spirits helps shape the care they offer to their staff and to the patients they serve.
Walking the Talk of Wholistic Care: A Physician’s Journey

Dr. Elizabeth Feldman is a faculty member and family physician at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center. She currently divides her time between work at the Family Practice Center on Ravenswood and two school-based clinics at Amundsen and Lakeview High Schools in Chicago.

Dr. Feldman has a strong commitment and long-term interest in exploring the connection between spirituality and the practice of medicine. She is a member of the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health Care and has co-led workshops on forming rabbi–doctor partnerships. She conducts similar workshops for medical students and keeps files of articles and other resources that challenge doctors to consider the spiritual dimensions of their medical practice. In her private life, Dr. Feldman is also a founding member of a Jewish house fellowship that now boasts a membership of 60 adults and 40 children. Members lead services and conduct many of the typical religious rites of birth and loss as part of being an intentional faith community hosted in members’ homes.

Dr. Feldman joined Advocate Healthcare when Ravenswood Hospital in Chicago was acquired by Advocate Health Care in 1993. She remembers being attracted and impressed by Advocate’s stated mission to be a place of healing and to promote wholistic care for the mind, body and spirit of their patients.

Dr. Feldman has used that time to silently pray a traditional Jewish blessing for hand-washing: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the Universe; who hallows us with your commandments and instructs us in the cleansing of our hands.”

Dr. Feldman calls such practices “transformative” – when she can remember to do them.

Dr. Feldman agrees that the practice of health care is changing. She believes that spiritual care is happening at the higher, more intensive levels of medicine, such as in cancer care or certain types of surgery. Within the past decade, doctors and hospitals have become much more aware of the spiritual dimensions of medical practice.

Feldman finds that many doctors are eager to find ways to think more deeply about what they do in the conduct of their own medical practice. Clergy and religious leaders could play an important and significant role in helping to spur the revolution to raise spiritual awareness in health care simply by convening groups of physicians who are already a part of their faith communities to consider how they walk the talk of wholistic health care.

It is standard medical practice for doctors to wash their hands before interacting with each new patient. Dr. Feldman has used that time to silently pray a traditional Jewish blessing for hand-washing.

But she has struggled to make Advocate’s mission a part of her regular, daily practice. Wholistic care requires that doctors know more about their patients’ lives – the social context of their life, work and habits. Without more time to spend talking with patients, Dr. Feldman struggles to attend to anything more than the immediate medical concerns of the vast majority of her patients.

While she awaits the slow, structural and institutional changes she hopes are still coming, Dr. Feldman tries to use prayer and other spiritual practices to increase her own spiritual awareness as she interacts with her patients, even if they remain unaware of it at the time.

For example, it is standard medical practice for doctors to wash their hands before interacting with each new patient.
The Department of Congregational Health Partnerships seeks to make real the vision of wholistic health—abundant life for all—by collaborating with community agents and congregations from all denominations and religious affiliations. By offering opportunities for training and education, consultation, resource linking, program development and networking, Congregational Health Partnerships supports congregations and community organizations as vital agents in creating communities of wholeness and healing.

Advocate Health Care is a faith-based health care system in the Chicagoland area grounded in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) and the United Church of Christ (UCC). Comprised of 8 hospitals, numerous neighborhood clinics, a home health care and hospice organization, and many other sites of care, Advocate’s mission is to serve the health needs of individuals, families and communities through a wholistic philosophy rooted in a fundamental understanding of human beings as created in the image of God.

Emergency Spiritual Care Teams
Advocate Health Care is developing a corps of clergy and religious leaders around each of its sites of care who will be trained as spiritual care responders in case of a community disaster. Trainings will be held around each hospital site. For information about a training coming to your area, contact the Congregational Health Partnership department at 847-384-3744.

Revitalizing Health Ministry
Saturday, April 17, 2004. 9 a.m. to noon. Advocate Trinity Hospital, 2320 E. 93rd St., Chicago, IL. This workshop will help you get in touch with what drew you into health ministry in the first place and help you ground your program in goals and plans that take you where you want to go. No fee, but registration is requested. Call 773-967-5184.

Getting Started: How to Develop a Parish Nurse Ministry in Your Congregation
Saturday, May 1, 2004, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center, 836 W. Wellington, Chicago, IL. An in-depth approach to developing a parish nurse program. Presenter: Nancy Rago Durbin, MS, RNC, Director of Advocate’s Parish Nurse Ministry. Cost is $20 per person. Call 847-384-3744 for more information.