‘Offering people care’ – uncovering the essential elements of health care chaplaincy

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Abstract
Hospital in-patients and families are frequently in need of spiritual support, particularly during illness, in death, or when facing difficult or challenging life events. The healthcare chaplain is recognised as having jurisdiction to address spiritual needs and is generally called upon to support others in times of crisis. Using a phenomenological approach this research aimed to explore healthcare chaplains’ experience of providing spiritual support to patients and families from minority religious and non-religious groups. The study revealed that healthcare chaplains display a wealth of skills, comprising insight, compassion, humility and empathy. Findings illustrate the significance of making sense of healthcare chaplaincy, the role of faith and of ritual, and the importance of education and training to inform and develop personal strength, resilience and creativity. Chaplains seek ongoing supports and at times, professional supervision, to facilitate self-awareness and ‘self-work’, as this is the foundation of quality chaplaincy care. This research is the first exploration of healthcare chaplains in this context. The work is important given the changing perspectives on religion and spirituality in Ireland and ongoing debates about the value of healthcare chaplains to address patients’ needs in an increasingly secular society.