

# GW spirituality and health pioneer publishes paper on development of the field

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While spirituality played a significant role in health care for centuries, technological advances in the 20th century overshadowed this more human side of medicine. Christina Puchalski, M.D.'94, RESD'97, founder and director of the George Washington University (GW) Institute for Spirituality and Health and professor of medicine at the GW School of Medicine and Health Sciences (SMHS), and co-authors published a commentary in *Academic Medicine* on the history of spirituality and health, the movement to reclaim medicine's spiritual roots, and the future of this field.

Spirituality, defined as a person's search for meaning, purpose, and connection, is now incorporated into the curricula of more than 75 percent of U.S. medical schools—curricula that was developed and implemented first at SMHS. In 2012, Oxford published the first textbook on [spirituality](#) and [health](#). National and International organizations have recognized the role of spirituality in patient-centered care. This didn't happen without the tireless efforts of Puchalski, her colleagues at GW including Jim Blatt, M.D., director of the Clinical Learning and Simulation Skills Center and professor of [medicine](#) at SMHS, the support she received at GW, and grants from organizations such as the John Templeton Foundation.

"The integration of spirituality in to our medical culture is crucial for creating compassionate, patient-centered physicians," said Puchalski. "It changes our health system from merely emphasizing physical suffering. Rather, physicians are taught to respond to all patients' suffering with

compassion, recognizing that health is more than the absence of disease. This is when healing, defined as patients' ability to find hope and meaning even in the midst of suffering, can occur."

The *Academic Medicine* paper includes:

- A report on the National Competencies in Spirituality and Health (NCSH), which was created at a consensus conference of faculty from seven medical schools and is being reported in the paper for the first time. The NCSH will organize efforts in this developing field within medical education and in national and international organizations.

- Information on the GW Institute for Spirituality and Health-Templeton Reflection Rounds Initiative, a program supported by the John Templeton Foundation. The program provides clerkship students the opportunity to reflect on patient encounters and develop their own inner resources to address the suffering of others.
- Commentary on the future direction of the field of spirituality and health.

"In the coming years, we hope the field of spirituality and health will have a more global reach, with a focus on interprofessional education," said Puchalski. "We also anticipate a full integration of spirituality and health education: From the first year of medical school, into residency, and continuing into professional development."

**More information:** The *Academic Medicine* paper, titled "Spirituality and Health: The Development of a Field," is available at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24280839](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24280839)

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