

RESEARCH MATTERS

RIA FEATURE

Filling the gap in information to improve spiritual care

By Alie Teetzel-Edmondstone

There is no shortage of data when it comes to long-term care. Many researchers are conducting studies and compiling data sets across Ontario and Canada hoping to find patterns and new innovations from the information they collect. However, there is an area where there is very little information — spiritual care.

Professor Jane Kuepfer, Schlegel Specialist in Spirituality and Aging saw this gap, and is doing something about it.

“Things have changed a lot in the last twenty years. In the past, most long-term care homes were run by churches and other religious organizations. That isn’t the case anymore. The role of the chaplain used to be very clear-cut, but now we are seeing a large variety in the role across long-term care in Ontario,



and many homes don’t have a team member dedicated to spiritual care. With all these changes, I thought it was a good time to gather some data,” she says.

Spiritual care is an important part of life in long-term care. Spiritual care providers can support well-being, promote resilience and provide opportunities for religious practice and rituals. Though the Long-term Care Home Act does require long-term care homes to provide spiritual programming, it isn’t specific on how. Kuepfer has seen variations on how this care is provided across the province — some homes have a dedicated chaplain

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with full-time hours, others have a part-time spiritual care team and others have a team member with skills in a different area providing spiritual care programming as part of their role.

Kuepfer is working to collect information about the role spiritual care plays across long-term care, who is providing that care and how they are doing it. She started by phoning long-term care homes to learn if they had a staff member responsible for spiritual care, then sent surveys by email to gather more information. Next, Kuepfer will interview chaplains, spiritual care providers and those responsible for providing spiritual programming in homes that don't employ a chaplain to find out what's working and what isn't, and to imagine together a trajectory toward better meeting spiritual need.

Kuepfer hopes this research will help guide best practices. This snapshot of spiritual care can help individual homes, larger companies and policy makers see what is currently available and what may be needed.

“The goal is to start a conversation around spiritual care in long-term care. Once we understand how this care is being delivered, we can look at best practices, guidelines and other ways to improve the way we care for the soul.”



Photo courtesy of Conrad Grebel University College.

The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging aims to enhance the quality of life and care of older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice. Innovations are developed and tested in the Schlegel Villages, and then shared to benefit older adults everywhere.



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