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# Professional Chaplains and Health Care Quality Improvement

## *Summary of Project Activities (July 2008)*

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### *Research questions*

In February 2007, The Health Care program of the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations made a \$100,000 grant to The Hastings Center, in collaboration with The HealthCare Chaplaincy, for a one-year project to explore the following research questions relevant to the “professionalizing” profession of health care chaplaincy and the ethical obligation of all health care professionals to participate in improving health care quality:

- How is quality of care understood by chaplains and the profession of chaplaincy?
- How can quality be measured in less standardized areas of health care delivery, including chaplaincy?
- What is the current and potential role of chaplains and chaplaincy in improving the quality of health care in the United States?

### *Research activities*

**March – August 2007: Recruitment of working group; empirical study; work in progress presentation at APC annual meeting**

Initial project activities, under the direction of co-principal investigators Nancy Berlinger at The Hastings Center and Martha Jacobs at The HealthCare Chaplaincy, included the recruitment of the project’s working group. Of the working group’s 21 members, 10 were chaplains or professionals working in chaplaincy. The co-PIs took special care to ensure that a high percentage of members were working chaplains, representing various health care settings (acute care, especially ICU and trauma; hospice) and specializations (oncology, palliative care; transplant medicine) with which chaplains are closely associated. The working group’s other members included bioethicists, empirical researchers, and clinicians. A list of project participants appears at the end of this document.

The first phase of the project also included an IRB-approved qualitative research study conducted by George Fitchett and colleagues Clayton Thomason and Kathryn Lyndes in the Department of Religion, Health, and Human Values at Rush University Medical Center. All three also served on the project's working group. The goal of this study was to elicit perspectives on the project's first research question: how did working chaplains understand "quality," including how quality in their own professional practice was related (or unrelated) to how they perceived quality improvement ("QI") activities in their institutions. Kathy Lyndes facilitated four focus groups, in New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, and the Phoenix area. Participants included 39 chaplains, some of whom were managers of chaplaincy programs. Data analysis was conducted by the Rush University investigators, with assistance from Nancy Berlinger and Martha Jacobs. Investigators uncovered a range of opinions and practices on quality and QI in chaplaincy. While some of the study participants expressed resistance to QI, and while others reduced QI to "making the numbers" or "doing more of what I already do," some shared stories of innovative QI efforts within their departments or as contributors to interdisciplinary or institutional QI activities. A common reaction among study participants was eagerness to learn more about practical, effective and creative ways chaplains were *improving* care at the bedside.

This phase of the project also included a work-in-progress presentation by the co-PIs at the 2007 annual meeting of the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC), at which an audience of more than 100 chaplains were introduced to the research questions and project design and invited to provide feedback to investigators. Two important insights were elicited during this presentation: chaplains wanted short final products on discrete topics that would be easy to share with colleagues and administrators, rather than a single long final report, and they urged us to publish these final products in places where they would be visible to physicians and to health care executives – not just to chaplains.

### ***September – December 2007: Working group meeting and follow-up***

Activities during the second phase of the project centered on the project's working group, which met October 9–10, 2007 at The Hastings Center. The meeting's agenda was built around the project's three research questions. It included a report on and discussion of the empirical study, plus invited presentations intended to spur interdisciplinary discussion. These discussion topics included the ethical basis for chaplaincy as a form of ministry and as a health care profession; the chaplain's role on interdisciplinary health care teams; and areas of health care where the role of chaplains – and, in some cases, other professionalizing professions, such as clinical ethicists and language interpreters – in improving quality may not be well-understood. In recognition of the fact that working chaplains have not regularly been included in interdisciplinary research on health care professions, the working group meeting included ample opportunities for chaplain participants to contribute their perspectives. These working chaplains also raised other relevant topics, such as the physical spaces in which spiritual care takes place within health care settings, and the extent to which chaplains are consulted on the design or improvement of the spaces – including the ER and the morgue as well as the chapel – in which they care for patients, families, or staff.

The co-PIs' review of the detailed meeting notes prepared by the project's research assistant helped to identify the topics that would be addressed in the project's principal final product, and the specific working group members best able to help address these topics through additional research and writing. The format of this product – a set of six essays of 1,000–4,000 words – was guided by input from

working chaplains, including participants at our 2007 APC presentation as well as working group members.

In November, Martha Jacobs and Nancy Berlinger participated in a meeting of Arthur Vining Davis Foundations' "Caring Attitudes" grantees. This meeting elicited observations from grantees involved in medical education that concurred with working-group and focus-group observations: within any health care profession – including medicine and surgery – concern for caring attitudes is perceived as a "soft" skill. Because chaplaincy may be wholly identified with caring attitudes, it may be perceived as the "softest" skill set of all, particularly if other clinical professions, as well as administrators, do not understand what chaplains do, how they are trained, or that they frequently work with extremely ill patients or with complex family situations.

Also during this phase of the project, George Fitchett and Nancy Berlinger collaborated on the design of an empirical study based on new research questions identified through this project's focus group component, in particular, the difficulty chaplains have in learning how to assess and improve the quality of their work based on relevant evidence rather than on practices adapted from more-standardized areas of health care. This new project would address chaplains' need for detailed case studies of quality improvement activities developed by chaplains, with an analysis of the structure and conditions needed to sustain these activities.

***January-March 2008: Recruitment of authors for essay set; research consultation with sociologists; research presentation at APC annual meeting; outline of articles based on focus group study***

During this phase of the project, the co-PIs confirmed topics and commissioned authors for the essay set's six pieces: in all cases, these pieces evolved out of the invited presentations, facilitated discussions, and *ad hoc* conversations at the working group meeting. In early February, Nancy Berlinger met with working group member Raymond de Vries and a fellow sociologist, Wendy Cadge for a daylong consultation on the sociology of chaplaincy as a professionalizing profession. This consultation drew on de Vries's expertise in the process by which health care occupations become professionalized, and Cadge's field research involving chaplains and other health care professionals involved in spiritual care. This innovative consultation resulted in an essay co-authored by these three participants.

While we initially conceived of the essay set as an electronic publication that would be published by The Hastings Center in June 2008 and disseminated principally through *PlainViews*, Greg Kaebnick, editor of the *Hastings Center Report*, the most prestigious and most frequently cited bioethics journal, proposed that the essay set be published in the *Report's* November-December issue. Publishing the essay set in the *Report* would allow us to reach a diverse audience of physicians, other clinicians, health care scholars, and health care executives, thereby addressing the need of chaplains for this product to reach and be easily shared with audiences beyond chaplaincy. Publishing in the *Report* also added this journal's 7000 print subscribers to our online distribution efforts, and, by ensuring that the essays will be individually indexed, will assist greatly in the ongoing impact of this project: *Report* articles are cited for an average of seven years after publication. After consulting with our authors, we concluded that the advantages of publishing in the *Report* offset the need to delay publication.

The audiences for the essay set include:

- *Chaplains and professional organizations in chaplaincy.* These audiences may be regular readers of the *Report*. They are likely to respect the *Report* and to pay attention to articles published in it. As described below, a key stakeholder group has already received the pre-publication text.
- *Senior health care administrators.* These audiences may be regular readers of the *Report*. They are likely to respect the *Report* and to pay attention to articles published in it.
- *Scholars, professionals, and organizations interested in health care quality and quality improvement, and/or in the role of spiritual care in promoting patient-centered care.* These audiences closely match the subscribers to and other readers of the *Report*.

Martha Jacobs, Nancy Berlinger, George Fitchett, and Clayton Thomason co-presented a session on the project at the 2008 APC annual meeting, with an updated PowerPoint slide set on the focus groups. As in 2007, the audience for this session exceeded 100 participants, a large audience for an APC session. The audiences from the 2007 and 2008 sessions, and from preliminary sessions offered by Jacobs and Berlinger in 2005 and 2006, constitute a core audience for this project's final products. Throughout the project, we have used the project's web page on The Hastings Center's website, the electronic newsletter *PlainViews* (edited by Martha Jacobs, with a monthly column by Nancy Berlinger), and e-mail, to maintain contact with this audience of chaplains with a strong interest in quality improvement.

Also during this phase of the project, George Fitchett and Nancy Berlinger completed the design for a follow-up empirical project, based on the focus group data and on a recently-published survey documenting the frequent involvement of chaplains in interdisciplinary clinical ethics consultations. They are currently seeking funding for this new project.

***April-June 2008: Drafting, editing, revision, and preliminary formatting of essays; discussion of essays by APC Board of Directors; drafting of articles based on focus group study; Academy Health presentation on focus group study; national teleconference presentation on project's research questions and findings***

This phase of the project focused on the preparation of the essay set. Martha Jacobs identified a key opportunity for stakeholders to discuss this publication: the June 21 strategic planning retreat of the APC's Board of Directors. We completed all textual revisions (apart from copyediting once the manuscripts enter the *Report's* production queue prior to publication) by June 10, and distributed the uncorrected proof of the essay set to the APC Board. While the proceedings of this meeting are confidential, Martha Jacobs characterized the general response to essays as follows: "there was a consensus that these articles were wonderful and would be of great help to the professionalizing of chaplaincy... people were looking forward to the release of them formally."

Also during this phase of the project, work continued on the preparation of two articles based on the focus group study. One of these will be a peer-reviewed journal article, to be submitted to a major medical, health policy, or bioethics journal, for readers involved in health care quality improvement and its clinical and ethical dimensions. Publishing these findings in a major journal will further assist our efforts to help chaplains to share our research with administrators and other clinicians. Clayton Thomason has outlined this article and, after presenting a poster on the focus group study at the 2008

Academy Health conference, had preliminary conversations with editors from the journal *Health Affairs* concerning submission. George Fitchett, Nancy Berlinger, and Martha Jacobs will be involved in the preparation of this manuscript for submission. The other article will be a commentary for *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* on the implications of research findings for chaplains' clinical practice. Kathy Lyndes is drafting this article; other investigators will provide comments prior to submission. Martha Jacobs and Nancy Berlinger may co-author a third article based on project research, if there are any topics that are not adequately covered by the essay set and focus-group articles; under consideration is an article on how chaplains and chaplaincy are represented in clinical practice guidelines on palliative and end of life care, for clinician audiences in these fields.

In June, Nancy Berlinger gave a teleconference presentation on the project to a national audience of 135 chaplains through the Teleconference Network of Texas.

### ***July–December 2008: Product production and dissemination; post-project activities***

During the summer, investigators will continue to work on completing and submitting journal articles for publication.

After Labor Day, the essay set will enter the *Hasting Center Report's* production queue. Budgeted funds have been reserved for the Center's Editorial Department to cover copyediting, design, electronic coding, and related production costs. Nancy Berlinger will consult with the Center's Public Affairs Department concerning outreach to religion reporters and health care reporters, and to stakeholders in the health care quality improvement community, who should be contacted about the publication of the essay set.

Prior to the publication of the essay set, Martha Jacobs and Nancy Berlinger will coordinate the announcement of the essay set in *PlainViews*, and on other websites and listservs used by chaplains and by other health care professionals who work with chaplains on interdisciplinary teams. These announcements will include a live link to the HTML version of the essay set, which will be housed on the *Report's* website. Working group members have identified websites and listservs, including the 8,000-member listserv of the Joint Commission's Hospitals, Language, and Culture Study, that will allow us to reach audiences interested in qualitative approaches to QI.

Budgeted funds have been reserved for the production of print-on-demand copies of the essay set, plus postcards with information about the essay set and how to download it, to be distributed via the *PlainViews* display at the Spiritual Care Summit in February 2009. This major conference is jointly sponsored by the six certifying organizations for chaplains and other pastoral care professionals in North America: in addition to the APC, these include the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE); the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC); the National Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC); the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) and the Canadian Association for Pastoral Practice and Education (CAPPE).

George Fitchett and Nancy Berlinger will continue to collaborate to secure funding for the follow-on empirical study based on this project.

### *Preliminary assessment of potential impact of project*

The timing of this project could not have been better. It was planned and carried out with careful attention to transparency, mindful that our goal was to influence the thinking and the practice of working chaplains and their professional organizations. Since 2005, we have given five workshops at APC annual meetings on this project or issues related to it, and have had regular conversations with the APC's past and present leaders to ensure that we were aware of how the field perceived the challenges it faced as it professionalized and became more integrated with other professions. As a result of building trust and audiences, as well as the quality of our collaborative research efforts, we anticipate that the project's products – in particular, the essay set – will have a significant impact on the direction of this profession. The APC – the largest and oldest certifying body in professional chaplaincy – launched a new strategic planning process at its Board retreat in June, to set goals for the next 5-10 years in the field of professional chaplaincy. As noted, this project's essay set was discussed at this gathering. It is our hope that these essays will encourage the Board to make *research, quality, and patient-centered care* priorities for the development of this field.

The opportunity to focus on the place of health care quality improvement in the ethics, practice, and professional maturation of chaplaincy will have far-reaching implications for this profession and for its individual members, who will now have some of the resources they need to educate themselves and their colleagues about the nature of quality in spiritual care, and how to make good care better. As this project has identified further research questions, and given empirical researchers an opportunity to collaborate with chaplains and chaplaincy, further resources may result from future projects and collaborations. We also look forward to sharing the essay set, and the journal articles now in preparation, with organizations in the health care quality improvement movement.

The profession of chaplaincy will be on firmer ground as a health care profession, and will be better integrated with other health care professions, thanks to the vision and generosity of the staff and trustees of the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. 🌿

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