

Teaching Diversity In Medical Care

By SARAH ROTHWELL

The Tampa Tribune

When it comes to medical care, not all people are comfortable with the same treatments and procedures.

To better treat patients of varying ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, University Community Hospital's Palliative Care Team recently started a cultural diversity program. The program revolves around a lecture series in which prominent men and women of different faiths will address the hospital community and answer questions about medical requirements, preferences and restrictions.

The first lecture took place Sept. 10 at Pepin Heart Hospital, where Imam Muhammad Sultan of the Islamic Society of Tampa Bay spoke about health care and the Muslim community. About 75 people from a variety of medical disciplines attended the event. Nurses, medical students, physicians, administrative staff and social workers were eager to learn and ask questions.

"I'm interested in learning more about the cultural differences in handling end-of-life issues," said Nancy Angard, a registered nurse practitioner.

Zubair Faroqui, a physician and member of the Palliative Care Team, introduced the speaker.

"There is a large Muslim community in the Tampa Bay area, and it's important to know how to respectfully treat the patients and their culture," Faroqui said. "Imam Sultan is here to spread awareness and answer your questions."

Sultan began his lecture by breaking the ice with a joke.

"Since it is election season, I have to say I approved this message," he said with a smile.

Sultan then outlined some basic elements of the Muslim faith. He explained that there is one creator who has authority over mankind, life and the universe. Muslims believe in life after death and that each human being is assigned a time of death.

"When it is your time, an angel comes and takes your soul away," Sultan said. "It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing; when it's time, it's time."

Sultan explained that medical professionals must treat Muslim women with extra care and respect their privacy. Male doctors should ask before touching and, when possible, a female doctor is preferred. Muslim women should be kept covered as fully as possible, even after death.

Within the Muslim faith, organ donation is not permitted after death. Decisions regarding life support are left to the family. Still, brain death is considered a valid definition of death within the culture.

"Are blood transfusions allowed?" Linda Stennett, a clinical nurse specialist, inquired during the question-and-answer session.

"Yes," Sultan replied.

"Are there any personal items that a patient might have that need to be treated with respect?" she asked.

"The Quran," Sultan answered.

Faroqui added that some Muslim patients may bring a prayer rug or mat, which needs to be kept clean and in a safe place.

"In the Christian faith, patients like to have their pastor visit. Is that the same in the Muslim faith?" Bishop Bruce Wright, the hospital chaplain, asked.

"Yes, patients may want to have someone present to console them and make it easier," Sultan said.

Following the question-and-answer session, Sultan invited guests to ask him questions one-on-one. He also handed out copies of the Quran and pamphlets on Islam.

"This was a great opportunity," he said. "It's important to connect the cultures and learn about each other. I have a saying: 'The more you know, the less you fear.'"

Linda Noel, a clinical nurse, said she learned a lot from Sultan.

"I was taking notes to take back to the other nurses on my team," she said. "It was very interesting to learn about the need to cover females and also to learn that blood transfusions are allowed; that was very helpful."

Holding his copy of the Quran, Wright said: "Today I learned how open-minded our hospital staff is to embrace and learn about different belief systems. I feel blessed by the turnout we had. We are working to become a hospital that is more spiritually and holistically minded."

The lecture series will continue in December. Wright is seeking a Hindu minister to speak. The date is to be determined.