

Engaging Standards of Practice: Becoming More Professional

by Brent Peery DMin BCC

When used as a noun, the word "professional" can mean variously:

- a person who belongs to one of the professions, esp. one of the learned professions.
- a person who earns a living in a sport or other occupation frequently engaged in by amateurs.
- a person who is expert at his or her work (1)

Professional chaplains are a learned group, with at least eight to 10 years of education and clinical training beyond high school. We certainly earn our living through work frequently engaged in by amateurs. We are experts at providing spiritual, emotional, relational and ethical care. We are professionals.

A recent part of the development of our profession has been the affirmation of standards of practice (2). "Standards of Practice are authoritative statements that describe broad responsibilities for which practitioners are accountable, 'reflect the values and priorities of the profession,' and 'provide direction for professional ... practice and a framework for the evaluation of practice'"(3). This article is one in a series telling the stories of professional health care chaplains engaging standards of practice in a variety of ways and settings.

In the last couple of years, I have had the privilege of providing professional consultation and education to hospital chaplains serving in the U.S. Navy. Recently, I met with a group of chaplain leaders within Navy Medicine to formulate a new comprehensive program of training and professional development for hospital chaplains in the Navy. The project is not yet finalized. However, our goal from the start was to give chaplains the knowledge and skills they need to demonstrate the competencies and standards of a professional chaplain. We began work toward that end from the [Common Standards for Professional Chaplaincy](#) and the [Standards of Practice for Professional Chaplains in Acute Care](#). These two documents have served as the North Star guiding us through the process.

Some of the subjects proposed for inclusion in this project include: chaplaincy ethics, clinical ethics, confidentiality, counseling theory, counseling skills, crisis care, diversity training, documentation, grief, group dynamics, health care team roles and collaboration, moral distress/injury, outcome-oriented chaplaincy, quality improvement, research, self awareness, self care, and theology for chaplaincy (4).

Certainly a case can be made that engaging the standards of practice will raise the level of professionalism among chaplains serving in Navy Medicine as well as other settings. By what measure? Knowledge? Skills? Respect? Perhaps. But, those are all secondary concerns. Of greater concern for me is that we become more expert providers of chaplaincy care. The positive and lasting difference we make in the lives of patients, families and the health care team is the ultimate measure of a professional chaplain. Standards of practice are an important means to that end.

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1 professional. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved October 01, 2010, from Dictionary.com Web site: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/professional>

2 see http://www.professionalchaplains.org/index.aspx?id=1210#acute_care

3 Fitchett et al. (2010) "Standards of Practice for Professional Chaplains in Acute Care Settings." p. 3.

4 Potential theological topics could include theodicy, providence, control, guilt, hope, mortality, etc. from a variety of faith perspectives.