

Ethics in Chaplaincy

Case One

A good friend of yours calls and tells you that her husband, who is 46 and has been healthy all of his life until now, has just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She is teary and angry, as she says the physician indicated that Matt (her husband) has most likely 2-4 months to 'get his affairs in order.' You listen without saying much but promise to call soon. You are thinking of your own spiritual teacher who died within two months of such a diagnosis ten years before. Hardly knowing how to be helpful, you feel an inner resolve to be present to Sharon through this experience, and for now put the situation out of your mind. About an hour later Matt calls and, much to your surprise, sounds cheerful and calm as he tells you about the treatment for pancreatic cancer that he has been researching in a clinic in Dublin. He says he has plans to fly over within the next few weeks and would like to meet for lunch to talk it over with you. With a sinking feeling about getting involved in a complicated situation, you agree to meet with him.

Case Two

You are a regular visitor at a local nursing home, and over the course of the last six months have gotten to know some of the residents rather well. You usually come once a week for a few hours on Saturday mornings, and spend time with those the director of the facility notes have indicated they would like a visitor. This day, the director meets you with a somber expression. "I'm worried about Mr. Mendoza," she tells you. "He just got news that he will have to have his left leg amputated above the knee, and at this age (85) it's not likely that he'll be able to walk again." You have seen Mr. Mendoza off and on for the last three months. He is a second generation immigrant from Mexico, born in San Diego, and worked as a Muni driver most of his life. Now, retired for twenty years, his wife has died, his children live in other states and he is essentially alone. He has adjusted well to the home since his arrival three months before, spending time with other residents talking about their lives, watching ball games, and generally becoming acclimated. He came to the home after his diabetes led to trouble with his vascular system, and following a hospital stay that left him in a wheel chair for the first time. "Please talk to him and cheer him up," the director says. "It's not good that he is so depressed."

Case Three

A Chinese American couple who married in their mid-forties find out a few years later that, unexpectedly, they are pregnant. After the initial shock, they decide to go forward with the pregnancy and being to anticipate a child with joy. George and Kim come to the clinic where you are a chaplain in training for the amniocentesis, and it becomes clear that their child will likely be born with anomalies — these may not be life-threatening, but the news is hard to hear. George is silent as the doctor lays out their options, including termination of the pregnancy. Kim bursts into tears and, after an attempt to comfort her results in inner tears echoing sobs, George rises abruptly and leaves the room, then walks out of the clinic. The physician has several patients waiting, and calls the nurse in to be with Kim. The nurse, working with a large case load herself, pages you.