HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE

BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 191214e

Saturday 14.12.2019

Other News

The interfaith Symposium on religion and medical ethics commits to promoting the integration of spirituality into medical care of children receiving palliative care

"Religion and Medical Ethics", the symposium held on 11 and 12 December for the World Innovation Summit for Health (WISH) and the Pontifical Academy for Life, attended by more than 250 experts in both sectors, has concluded its work at the Augustinianum.

Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy of Life, undertook to engage in further work with WISH, to convene a special meeting of paediatric palliative care specialists alongside religious and medical ethicists, in the hope of producing a framework for focusing on the specific spiritual support needed for children requiring palliative care and their families.

Speaking alongside Archbishop Paglia, Sultana Afdhal, chief executive officer of WISH, pledged to develop training sessions for healthcare workers that emphasise how spirituality needs to be considered as integral to holistic care.

"It is vital that our discussions on palliative care and the mental health of older people lead to positive action that is patient focused, considers spiritual needs, and that helps healthcare workers to better deliver compassionate care," Afdhal said.

The first day of the symposium focused on medical and spiritual aspects of providing ethical palliative care from the perspective of the three major Abrahamic religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Highlights of the day included the opening speech of Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life and joint organiser of the event. He described palliative care as a "human right", and was critical of a "cruel society" that leaves many needing palliative care "pushed to the margins". With regard to the importance of preserving patients' dignity, he stressed the universal nature of suffering and death, and the need to pay due care to the soul and mind, as well as the body, regardless of religious affinity.

The Chief Rabbi of Rome, Dr Riccardo di Segni, described palliative care as an expression of love and

friendship, and encouraged people to recognise the privilege of caring for sick loved ones – wanting to "protect" them and "cherish them as something precious". Professor Julian Hughes, representing the British Medical Journal (The BMJ) took a medical perspective, calling the spiritual, ethical and medical issues surrounding palliative care "complicated", and demonstrated the complexity of the decision-making process that health providers must grapple with.

On the second day, the focus was on the sensitive topic of mental health care for the elderly. In his talk, "Mental Health and the Wellbeing of Older People", Bishop Noel Simard of Valleyfield in Canada emphasised patients' need and right to spiritual "self-transcendence" as part of treatment, as well as the benefits of spiritual approaches to patients' overall well-being. A supporter of interfaith dialogue, he agreed that: "The majority of researches on the link between spirituality and health are made under a model of dialogue and integration".

Further highlights included a detailed presentation from Qatar-based Professor Ayman Shabana, Associate Research Professor, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, who showed how Islamic Sharia law already provides well-developed ethical guidance for medical practitioners engaged in providing mental health support for the elderly. In his presentation on "The Mental Health of the Elderly from an Islamic Perspective", he explained that the Islamic approach includes a strong faith-based element that is proven to benefit patients and added that Islam recognises the need for teamwork in supporting patients and their families, with medical professionals, spiritual guides and family members all having input into care packages.