

## **THE HUMANIST PATIENT**

### **Special Considerations**

- 1) Humanists believe strongly in the individual's right to freedom of choice in the main decisions of life and death, and this will, therefore, have a bearing on discussions about a patient's prognosis and treatment.
- 2) "Humanist" covers a wide range of attitudes, but it does imply that the patient has thought seriously about belief and death.
- 3) "Non-religious" covers a much wider range – and may include those who don't care or have not thought about these matters.
- 4) Humanists will have no objections to medical treatments, transplants and transfusions on religious grounds, but these are matters of personal choice and should be discussed with the patient.
- 5) Humanists may be offended by questions or assumptions about their "religion" (the preferred term, in line with the Human Rights Act, is "belief").
- 6) Hospital admission forms with multiple choice options on religion, concluding with the option of "No religion", 'None' or 'Other' should be replaced by an open question about "religion or belief".
- 7) Patients describing themselves as 'Humanist' should not be allocated to a chaplain, as sometimes occurs.

### **Diet**

- 1) Many humanists have ethical and environmental concerns about how their food is produced and would appreciate attempts to source food ethically.
- 2) Because of this, there are more than the average number of vegetarians and vegans amongst humanists, though this is a matter of personal choice.

### **Maternal and perinatal care**

- 1) Humanists will value opportunities to participate in decisions about their care and the care of their baby.
- 2) There are no religious objections to termination of pregnancy, but this should be a matter for the individual patient to decide.
- 3) In cases where there is risk or occurrence of perinatal mortality, religious options concerning baptism, funeral, reverent disposal or memorial will not be appropriate, especially as humanist alternatives are available.

### **Care of the Dying**

- 1) Most humanists have thought about death and many have a stoical attitude to it. Many would prefer to know when they or their relatives are dying to give them time to prepare – by saying farewells, setting their affairs in order, or planning their funeral; but this is a personal matter and preferences will vary.
- 2) Humanists do not generally adopt the extreme position that all life in all circumstances is worth saving, but they will wish to be consulted on this.
- 3) In circumstances where they are suffering greatly and death is inevitable, humanists are most unlikely to have ethical objections to pain relief, even if it hastens death – and they will welcome opportunities to make clear their preferences on this and other palliative care.
- 4) The chaplain will not be an appropriate visitor and most humanists would prefer to talk to friends, family, a humanist officiant (particularly about a funeral) or to receive other appropriate secular support..

- 5) Humanists will not welcome – and may be distressed by – prayers at the bedside, but at the point of death might appreciate the comforting presence of a nurse or other lay person.

### **Post-mortem and Organ Donation**

Humanists try to do some good in the world, so are unlikely to mind being asked about donation, or to object either to a post-mortem or to the donation of commonly required organs. Families will want to be asked for consent and to see best practice being observed in terms of the retention of organs or other tissue

### **Other Considerations**

- 1) If the hospital is left in charge of funeral arrangements, a funeral director should be informed as soon as possible that a non-religious humanist service will be required for this patient.
- 2) If the body is to be laid out for viewing in the hospital, it is important that it should not be dressed in any religious vestment, and that there should be no cross, bible or other religious item on view.
- 3) Either cremation or burial is acceptable – this is a matter of personal preference for a humanist, as is where the ashes are scattered or the burial takes place.
- 4) If the patient's family is making arrangements, they should be made aware that the patient's beliefs and preferences would indicate a humanist funeral via the British Humanist Association. The BHA publishes an excellent practical guide to non-religious funeral ceremonies, *Funerals without God* by Jane Wynne Willson (ISBN 0-901825-14X), and can refer the family to a local officiant to conduct the funeral.
- 5) The family should be made aware of appropriate sources of bereavement support, as in any other case.

### **For more information**

British Humanist Association  
1 Gower Street  
LONDON  
WC1E 6HD

#### **Telephone**

General Enquiries: 020 7079 3580  
Fax: 020 7079 3588

#### **Email**

[info@humanism.org.uk](mailto:info@humanism.org.uk)

#### **Website**

[www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk)