Atheopagan Clerical Hospital and Hospice Support Guidelines

These guidelines exist to support Atheopagan clerics in providing spiritual support to Atheopagans, non-theist Pagans, secular and atheist people, and theist Pagans in the hospital, as well as their families and the staff of the hospital or hospice.

Atheopagan clerics are unusual in that we provide support to Pagans generally and to others who are not of our particular religious path, such as pure atheists and other secular people. These populations are underserved by chaplains and other clergy and deserve the same kind of support that members of mainstream religions receive.

KEY SKILLS

- An enquiring and creative mind
- Good listening skills
- A sense of humor and a thick skin
- Good ritual skills so you can share rituals with the patient if desired
- Able to communicate effectively
- Able to do simple administration to track visits and tasks agreed to with patients
- Willingness to learn
- Familiarity with and adherence to the Atheopagan General Ethical Guidelines for Clerics Performing Community Services

How to Conduct a Hospital Visit

Some clerics may not have been around death or serious illnesses. They may feel inadequate with words during times of illness or disease. Hospital and hospice visits by a cleric are for those in the hospital, those who are preparing for a surgery, and those who are preparing for death, as well as family members. A visiting cleric can bring calmness into an otherwise chaotic situation.

A visit should include a heart-felt concern about an upcoming operation, test, illness, recovery or death. One should come into the room quietly, respecting the privacy of the individual as well as respecting those who are there visiting. Asking questions to the patient or other family members is normal. Being light-hearted and encouraging can be appropriate but again, respect the gravity of the situation.

Sometimes it can be difficult to visit a patient in the hospital or hospice, but you can have a positive influence on them, whether they are your friend, family, community member or simply a secular person who can use some support.

Listed below are some simple hospital or hospice clerical visitor guidelines. These may help to give you confidence you need for your visits.

DOS

- **Do ask your patient's or other family member's permission to visit before you arrive**. Ask them to be candid with you. If they prefer you not visit, ask them if another day would be better, or if they would prefer you visit once they get home, or not to visit at all. Many patients love visitors, but some just don't feel up to it. Be mindful of the numbers of people visiting and respect their time and health. Do your patient the courtesy of asking permission, and asking how you can be most helpful to them.

- **<u>When calling, do</u> be clear that you are not an evangelist of any kind.** Secular and Pagan patients have chosen their paths and DO NOT want to be proselytized to IN ANY WAY. If the patient is a Pagan, tell them you can help them to celebrate their religion however they prefer (whether or not this involves god/desses—remember, this visit is about the *patient,* not you and your preferences).

- **<u>Do</u> wash your hands and sanitize them before and after you touch the patient.** If you wash your hands, then touch something else, like a telephone or TV remote or even the bed linens or your jacket, wash your hands and sanitize them again. Infections come from almost any source and the pathogens can survive on surfaces for days. You can't risk being responsible for making the patient even sicker than they already are.

- **<u>Do</u> take flowers as long as you know your patient isn't allergic to them, and is in a room by themselves.** You can do this in advance through a florist, also. If your patient shares a hospital room, the other person may have allergies. Be mindful of that. Avoid balloons—they are harmful to wildlife.

- **<u>Do</u> consider alternatives to flowers: a card, something a child has made for you to give to the patient, a book to read, a crossword puzzle book, are good choices**. The idea isn't to spend much money; instead it is about making the patient feel cared for without creating problems that might trigger an allergic reaction.

- **<u>Do</u> turn off your cell phone, or at least turn the ringer off**. Different hospitals have different rules about where and when cell phones can be used. In some cases, they may interfere with patient-care devices, so your patient can be at risk if you don't follow the rules. In other cases, it is simply a consideration for those who are trying to sleep and heal and don't want to be annoyed by ring tones.

- **<u>Do</u> stay for a short time**. It is the fact that you have taken the time to visit, and not the length of time you stay that gives your patient the boost. Staying too long may tire them out. Better to visit more frequently, but for no more than a half hour or so each time.

- **<u>Do</u> leave the room if the doctor or provider arrives to examine or talk to the patient**. The conversation or treatment they provide is private, and unless you are a proxy, parent, spouse or someone else who is an official advocate for the patient, that conversation is not your business. You can return once the provider leaves.

- **<u>Do</u> offer to conduct a simple ritual with a Pagan patient.** Ask them what they would like to focus the ritual around and, if they are theist, what deities they would like to invoke.

DON'TS

- **<u>Don't</u> enter the hospital if you have any symptoms that could be contagious**. Neither your patient nor other hospital workers can afford to catch whatever you have. If you have symptoms like a cough, runny nose, rash or even diarrhea, don't visit. Make a phone call or send a card instead.

- **<u>Don't</u> be unrealistically optimistic.** It is a disservice to a patient to pretend that their condition is less serious than it really is. Confront their fears honestly, listen attentively, and confirm their feelings.

- **<u>Don't</u> insert yourself into conflict between the patient and their family, unless asked to do so by the patient.** Religious differences or old family conflicts can rise to the surface when a

member of a family is hospitalized; you should avoid engaging with these issues and simply provide support to the patient unless directly asked by the patient for help.

- **Don't take young children to visit unless it's absolutely necessary**. Even then, check with the hospital before you take a child with you. Many hospitals have restrictions on when children may visit.

- **Don't take food to your patient unless you know the patient can tolerate it**. Many patients, especially those with certain diseases or even those who have recently had anesthesia for surgery, are put on special diets while in the hospital. Our goodies could cause big problems.

- **Don't visit if your presence will cause stress or anxiety**. If you know the person and there is conflict between you, don't go. Wait until they return home for any attempt to repair the relationship.

- **Don't expect the patient to entertain you**. The patient is there to heal and get healthy again, not to talk or keep you occupied. It may be better for your patient to sleep or rest than to carry a conversation with you. If you ask them before you visit, gauge their tone of voice as well as the words they use. They may try to be polite, but may prefer solitude instead of a visit.

- **Don't stay home, on the other hand, because you assume the patient prefers you to not visit**. You won't know until you ask. It is best to attempt making contact and personal visits than not.