

## **Preparing chaplains for Afghanistan deployment: Training program sees hospital team up with Canadian Forces**

**April 9, 2007**

In an effort to better prepare military chaplains for the challenges they will face in Afghanistan, the spiritual and religious care team at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto has implemented an extensive training program for chaplains of the Canadian Forces.

Called the "Chaplain Trauma Resilience Program," it exposes military chaplains to some of the harsh realities they will encounter overseas – such as traumatic injuries, death and life-threatening situations. In doing so, the military chaplains learn how to handle their own individual emotional, physical and spiritual responses to such realities so they can better attend to the needs of others in crisis.

"The goal of this program is to increase the chaplains' personal comfort, self awareness and confidence within the context of traumatic events by using the controlled setting of the hospital," says Father Todd Meaker, a Major in the Canadian Forces. "This, in turn, will enable increased trauma resiliency when confronted with the uncontrolled environment of Afghanistan."

As a senior military chaplain with the Army in Halifax, Father (Major) Meaker is responsible for the military chaplains recently deployed to Kandahar.

The program completed its pilot training exercise at Sunnybrook with four military chaplains at the end of January, just a few short weeks before the group was deployed to Afghanistan. The military chaplains who supervised the course are recommending more training sessions take place at Sunnybrook this summer. As well, there is a further recommendation regarding the need for such training with military chaplains who remain on Canadian soil and those deployed on other Canadian Forces' operations overseas.

"With the help of the Sunnybrook staff, the military chaplains were exposed to the extremes of what happens to the human body in trauma and in death," says Pam McCarroll, professional leader and supervisor in spiritual and religious care at Sunnybrook, who coordinated the training session. "They observed autopsies, open heart surgery and several other traumatic injuries being treated during the week they were here."

The program includes debriefing sessions, where the trainees and a Sunnybrook staff chaplain discuss their personal reactions to what they've seen and felt throughout the week. Kathy Edmison, with her background as an educator and military chaplain, was the ideal education leader for the program. As well, two trauma mentors, Dan West and Eric Davis – on-call chaplains with particular expertise and familiarity with ER and trauma – were present at all times to offer guidance and support.

Providing assistance to the program were members of Sunnybrook's coveted trauma program, which is the largest in Canada, as well as the staff in the emergency department, regional burn unit, operating room, Schulich Heart Centre, anatomic pathology and social work, to name a few.

The military chaplains were given a tour of the Sunnybrook critical care unit and were able to meet with an injured soldier recuperating from injuries sustained in Afghanistan. They also met with Sunnybrook trauma surgeon Dr. Homer Tien, who is also a Major in the Canadian Forces, and has worked in the Canadian military field hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

"The response was unbelievable," says McCarroll, whose role also included monitoring and assessing program effectiveness. "The four chaplains reported experiencing great alleviation of anxiety by the end of the program, having more confidence in themselves and their abilities, and less anxiety and fear about what was to come."

The Canadian Forces' chaplains who observed the training have strongly recommended this partnership with Sunnybrook to continue.

"Sunnybrook is a leader in trauma care training and has existing partnerships with the Canadian Forces, the Department of National Defence and Veterans Canada," says Father (Major) Meaker. "The program not only met its goals, it clarified the proactive value of providing increased levels of confidence toward deployment, by enhancing self awareness of individual responses, physically, emotionally and most importantly, spiritually."

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