

New 'eleventh commandment' inspires holistic geriatric care

By Emily Morrison

At a recent seminar on holistic health care for the elderly, Mary Pat Pennell told the story of a 51-year-old patient who "simply turned her face to the wall and died." Hospitalized for emphysema, the woman had been deserted by her family, who had stopped coming to visit her.

Such cases are often devoid of any reasonable medical explanation. Aging husbands die, for example, because their wives have recently died, and the surviving spouse loses the will to live. Other patients die, according to Pennell, because their belief systems are dead. Often, she added, "they simply can't believe they are going to get well!"

One day before the eve of Older Americans Month (traditionally celebrated throughout the month of May each year), Pennell, the dean of health sciences at Monroe Community College, was guest speaker at a professional workshop offered Wednesday, April 29, by St. Ann's Home/The Heritage, the long-term care and health-related facility on Portland Avenue in Rochester. Open to registered nurses, licensed practical nurses and nursing students, the workshop provided a framework for integrating a holistic view of health into traditional geriatric care.

"Holistic health care addresses itself to the physical, social, psychological, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of those who come for care," explained Pennell, a nurse who has been active in long-term care, as well as computers in health care, AIDS-related issues and women's health concerns.

"Holistic care uses therapeutic approaches that mobilize the individual's innate capacity for self-healing," added Pennell, who believe that, while medical science has made great strides in describing the body's various physiological systems, little has been done to document two equally vital systems on which our lives depend.

"The healing system can be defined as the way the body mobilizes itself to combat disease," noted Pennell. "The belief system is what activates the healing system. The belief system is our master switch and we're just beginning to learn how it works."

Our confidence — or lack of it — significantly affects the body's immune and healing systems, observed Pennell of a phenomenon that has little to do with age *per se*, although the elderly are certainly susceptible to the more severely life-threatening aspects of it. Whether a patient is receiving acute or long-term care, says Pennell, the prognosis for effective health care management is the same.

"When you're well, you don't give health a second thought," Pennell told her audience. "When you're sick, you think of nothing else. Holistic health care has to do with helping the patient to heal the split that has occurred among mind, body and spirit. Our job as holistic health-care givers is to put those pieces back together."

The goal of such an approach is to reunite those aspects of health care that have been divided because of specialization. "The holistic approach involves treating individuals in the

context of their culture, their family and their environment," said Pennell. The latter, she added, might be viewed as the patient's community, with special emphasis on the "community of beliefs" harbored by individual patients.

At the turn of the century, she offered by way of example, women carried bottles of what were known as "the vapors" to remedy frequent fainting spells. Swooning was made acceptable as what amounted to an "illness" by physicians who may well have induced such beliefs as a means of generating income. Modern women, of course, would laugh at such antiquated notions, yet they had a significant effect on health care during the period. "If we ignore those differences in people's 'communities of belief,' we are ignoring an important factor," Pennell pointed out.

"Holistic health is viewed as a positive state, not the absence of disease," stated Pennell, who described health as a continuum with clinical disease at the lower end and "super health" at the upper end. "Every day of our life, we are somewhere along that continuum," she explained. "The objective of holistic health care is to move people up that continuum in the best ways we can."

"The holistic approach emphasizes the fact that each of us is responsible for his or her own health. That is the new 11th commandment. Our job is to help people mobilize their own capabilities of moving themselves toward high-level wellness."

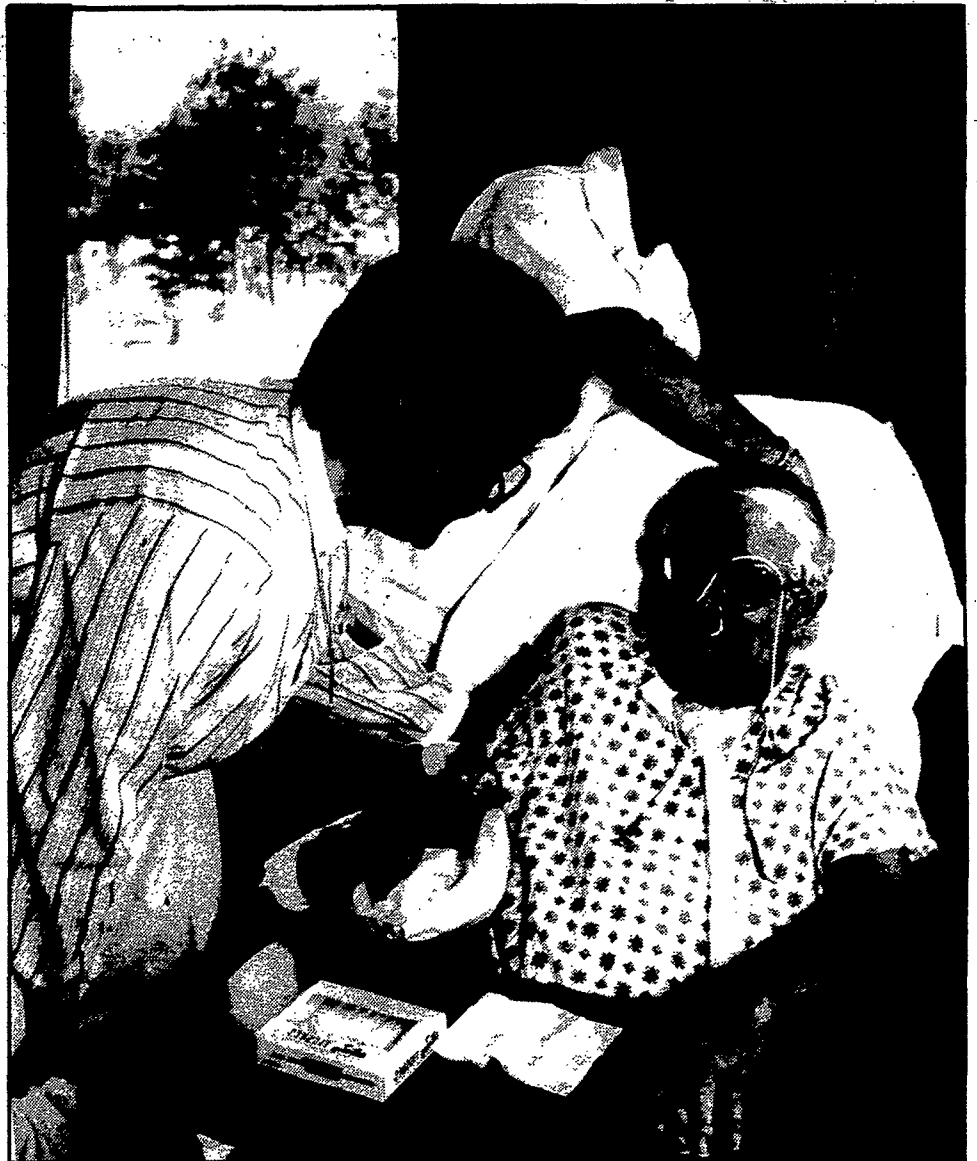
New techniques for managing one's own health include self-hypnosis (which Pennell swears by, as a cure for migraine headaches), meditation, yoga, role-playing and visualization — a technique whereby occupational and physical therapists teach patients or clients to imagine themselves walking, using a prosthesis or simply being healthy again.

After Pennell's lecture, audience members at the St. Ann's seminar divided into smaller groups to attend workshops on the applications of holistic concepts to the physical, psychological and emotional, recreational and leisure, and spiritual care of long-term patients. Participants explored the ramifications of what Dr. James Wood termed the "multidisciplinary approach" to care of the ambulatory, institutionalized elderly.

Employing what Wood called "the team concept" to long-term care, facilities such as St. Ann's attempt to achieve "a blurring of role definitions," rooted in the holistic philosophy. Physicians, nurses, social workers, chaplains, physical therapists, and a "case manager" who may be a family member or friend collaborate on making certain the elderly patient gets the highest quality of care possible.

"We've always attempted to take care of the whole person in long-term care," commented Sister Marie Michelle Peartree, president of St. Ann's Home. "We look at (residents) in their entirety, and not just in terms of their frailties and weaknesses."

Positive reinforcement of wellness — rather than an exclusive emphasis on failing health or the disabilities often perceived to go hand-in-hand with advancing age — can help elderly



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Nurse Emery Lavarn (rear) and Sister Ann Vincent DeRitis, SSSJ, look in on Anthony Frumuşa in his room at Rochester General Hospital. Sister Ann Vincent, chaplain at Rochester General, presented a slide show on spiritual care at St. Ann's holistic health seminar.

long-term facility residents to maintain a positive outlook on their circumstances. Mary Pat Pennell suggested that wellness depends on such factors as good nutrition, regular exercise, socialization, cheerful surroundings and physical contact between caregivers and nursing-home residents.

"The 'laying on of hands' is absolutely essential in conveying your energy into the patient's 'energy bank,' Pennell offered. "Whatever happened to the nurse who gave back rubs? Touch makes a lot of difference."

Sometimes, she added, old-fashioned intuition on the part of caregivers proves the best 'medicine' for the flagging spirits of long-term care residents. During her lecture, Pennell recounted the story of Maddie, a geriatric nurse with a special flair for the right instincts.

"Maddie, I'm gonna die," Pennell recalled a patient saying, when Maddie asked her to get up one morning.

"Sure you are, honey, but you ain't gonna do it today, because today is the day we get our hair fixed," Maddie is said to have shot back.

"She did get up, she got dressed and we didn't hear any more about dying for two weeks," Pennell observed.

"Holistic health care transforms its practitioners as well as its patients," Pennell noted, just before seminar participants split into smaller groups and then resumed to watch a slide show produced by Father Donald F. Schwab on the effects of spiritual care.

"Health-care givers should be genuine — not the dispensers of lotions and pills and platitudes. The future of our health as a people will be affected by this approach, both in the training of professionals and the education of the citizens who must ultimately take responsibility for their own health care," Pennell concluded.

"Special training is certainly useful in geriatrics," as Dr. James Wood observed, "but the best teachers in geriatrics are the patients themselves." Given the graying of the American population and the trend toward longer life-spans, the holistic approach to health care is a lesson we'd all do well to teach ourselves.

Spirituality week offered at divinity school this summer

Three Rochester institutions are sponsoring the second annual Spirituality Institute this summer. The five-day program, scheduled for the week of July 13-17 on the campus of the Colgate Rochester Divinity School/Bexley Hall/Crozer Theological Seminary, will feature two well-known speakers, the Anglican author Kenneth Leech and native American lecturer Jose Hobday, OSF.

The Diocese of Rochester, the divinity school and St. Bernard's Institute present the annual Spirituality Institute as a service to the Rochester community, especially for those who seek an intensive program of prayer, reflection, lecture and discussion on the nature of the religious experience. "Contexts for Spiritual Growth: Self, Faith Community and World"

is the topic for this year's program.

Leech is best known for his writings on homelessness, the drug subculture, spiritual counseling and pastoral care. Hobday is a Seneca Iroquois and professed sister of St. Francis, who lectures regularly throughout the United States on Christian and native American subjects.

Carol Doran, associate professor of church music and director of community worship at the divinity school, will coordinate the Morning Prayer services that will precede each day's activities.

Information on registration, housing and fees is available from St. Bernard's Institute. (716)271-1320, ext. 290.

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