

NEXT SPIRITUALITY SIG MEMBERS' MEETING

**Royal College of Psychiatrists
Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group**

Programme for Friday February 29th 2008

**Venue: Society of Chemical Industry
15 Belgrave Square, London, SW1X 8PS**

'Researching Spirituality: Paradigms and Empirical findings'

- 10.15 Coffee
- 10.45 Preliminary Notices: **Dr. Sarah Egger** (Chair)
- 11.00 **'Spiritual Experience, Spiritual Practice and Psychological Distress'**

Professor Harald Walach and Dr. Niko Kohls
- 12.30 Lunch
- 1.45 **'Religion and Suicide: An exploratory study of the role of the Church in deaths by Suicide in the Highlands'**

Professor John Swinton
- 3.00 **'The Assessment of Spirituality: a Concise Guide'**

Professor Chris Lewis
- 4.15 Tea and Plenary
- 5.00 Close

**PLEASE NOTE – THIS PROGRAMME IS FOR
SIG MEMBERS AND INVITED GUESTS ONLY**

Programme Notes:

‘Spiritual Experience, Spiritual Practice and Psychological Distress’

Professor Harald Walach and Dr. Niko Kohls

Traditionally, exceptional human experiences have been frequently taken as psychiatric symptoms. Using our Exceptional Experiences Questionnaire and structural equation modelling we could show in a study with more than 600 participants and two measurements 6 months apart that such experiences can be differentiated into several kinds:

- (a) spiritual experiences and psychopathological symptoms are distinct
- (b) positive spiritual experiences have some small protective effects and
- (c) negative spiritual experiences, or experiences of ego-loss contribute substantially to psychological distress.

Most importantly, we saw that spiritual practice has a decisive effect. Individuals with spiritual practice interpret their experiences of ego-loss more positively than those without such a practice, and for participants with a spiritual practice, the negative influence of experiences of ego loss on psychological distress is much less than with individuals without such a practice. In a recent study in a British sample of 111 chronically ill patients (chronic fatigue, irritable bowel and migraine) we could replicate this finding.

Spiritual practice seems to not only instil a propensity for positive spiritual experiences, but mainly buffer the inevitable effects of experiences of ego-loss and deconstruction that occur during a life-time. The consequences for health psychology and clinical practice are obvious. We suggest that spiritual experiences have to be explored more thoroughly. They seem to constitute a powerful predictor, in fact twice as powerful as social support, for psychological distress. Further, spiritual practice seems to play the role of a strong protective factor, or, perhaps more accurately: a lack of spiritual practice can be seen as a risk factor for poor mental health and psychological distress.

About the speakers:

Harald Walach is a research professor in psychology at the University of Northampton and director of the European office of the Samuelli Institute. Previously with the University Hospital Freiburg, Germany, where he directed a research group evaluating complementary and alternative medicine, he has moved to the UK 2 years ago to take up a new position. He has developed a new MSc program in Transpersonal Psychology and Consciousness Studies, which he directs. He has a long track record in researching complementary and alternative medicine, mainly homeopathy, spiritual healing and most recently mindfulness based approaches. He has, together with his graduate students, constructed new measurement instruments, such as the Exceptional Experiences Questionnaire and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory, conducted a number of randomised clinical studies, applied and experimental

studies, and is working at a basic model for generalised non-local effects using experimental approaches. His most recent interests have centred on the impact of spirituality on health and the importance of spirituality and consciousness, as well as the implementation of a mindfulness training for students, Mindfulness Based Coping with University Life, which he is developing with a PhD student. He is the president of the International Society for Complementary Medical Research (www.iscmr.org), founding member of the German Transpersonal Society, editor in chief of "Spirituality and Health International" and "Research in Complementary Medicine".

Niko Kohls has worked as a consultant for the insurance industry, for medical consulting and other businesses, before returning to academia doing his PhD as a scholar of the Institute of Frontier Areas, Freiburg, Germany. As a result of his PhD work he validated the Exceptional Experiences Questionnaire and took up a position as research fellow at the University of Northampton in Prof. Walach's group, where he worked for the last two years, elaborating the predictive value of spirituality and spiritual practice. As of 2008 he will be Samueli-Rockefeller fellow at the Institute for Generation Research at the Interfaculty for Human Sciences at the University of Munich.

'Religion and Suicide: An exploratory study of the role of the Church in deaths by Suicide in the Highlands'

Professor John Swinton

My presentation will focus on a piece of research carried out in 2005 that looked at the way in which ministers of the church and their communities in the Highlands experience suicide and suicidal behaviour.

Suicide rates in Scotland continued to increase in the 1980's and 1990's at a time when they were decreasing in England and Wales. This was largely because of an increase in rates in younger men. Some rural areas of Scotland have consistently high male suicide rates, including Highland and Western Isles. This has attracted widespread media attention.

The Scottish government have produced a national strategy and action plan 'Choose Life' in which they announce an intention to reduce suicide by 20% by 2013. They note a need to balance high risk approaches with broader interventions. They note the importance of acknowledging local issues and mobilising local resources. The role of the voluntary sector and community groups is highlighted. The role of the church, an obvious voluntary organisation, is not addressed in any detail. This presentation will explore the role of the church (as a particular mode of religious community) in a rural area with a suicide rate higher than the Scottish average.

About the speaker:

John Swinton holds the chair in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom. He is also an honorary Professor at Aberdeen's Centre for Advanced Studies in Nursing. Professor Swinton worked as a registered nurse for 16 years specializing in mental health. He also worked for a number of years as a community mental health chaplain. Professor Swinton's areas of research include the relationship between theology and health and the theology and spirituality of disability. In 2004 Professor Swinton founded the Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability at the University of Aberdeen. (www.abdn.ac.uk/cshad)

'The assessment of spirituality: A concise guide'

Professor Chris Lewis

There is consistent evidence supporting a significant relationship between aspects of spirituality and better mental health among a variety of healthy and patient populations. Hence, the investigation of spiritual factors in mental health care is clearly warranted and clinically relevant. However, despite the growing interest in spirituality, there remains a comparative dearth of well-validated, psychometrically sound instruments to measure aspects of spirituality. The aim of the present paper has been to provide a review of several important considerations particular to the assessment of spirituality, most notably around definitional issues, and then to describe and review the most commonly used procedures and instruments for the assessment of spirituality. The present review provides a concise resource for both practitioners and academics interested in the assessment of spirituality.

About the speaker:

Christopher Alan Lewis is Reader in Psychology at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. He holds degrees in psychology, education and theology. He is a Registered Psychologist and Fellow of the Psychological Society of Ireland, and a Chartered Health Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. He is co-editor of the journal *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, as well as Editor of the *Irish Journal of Psychology*. He has published widely on the psychology of religion, and in particular on the relationship of religion and mental health.