



Talking with ... A doctor who heals people's spirits

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Name: **Dr. Bruce Feldstein**

Age: **62**

City: **Palo Alto**

Position: **Founder, Jewish Chaplaincy at Stanford**

J.: *You were an emergency room physician for 19 years, until a back injury led you to change course. You became a visiting scholar at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics, completed chaplaincy training at Stanford Hospital and in 2000 founded the Jewish Chaplaincy. How has this unexpected life path changed you?*

Dr. Bruce Feldstein: I never imagined I would become a chaplain. Now I am more reflective and intuitive, and a deep inner spirituality has grown and blossomed in me over the years.

You are also former acting president of the worldwide Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains, where you helped introduce spiritual care as a profession into Israeli hospitals. You said you were action-oriented as an ER doctor, but it sounds like you still are.



Dr. Bruce Feldstein

I am, in that what I am doing ... really impacts the lives of individual patients and medical students, whether I am at the bedside of a patient or working with medical students. In each person, there is a unique spirit, and I help create the conditions that help people see it for themselves and let that spirit come forth.

How do you describe what you do, and what is the mission of the Jewish Chaplaincy?

My work is a blend of Judaism, medicine and spirituality, modeled after Maimonides. Moshe ben Maimon was a rabbi, physician and philosopher in the 12th century. The chaplaincy provides spiritual care to Jewish patients, families and staff; we are involved in community activities, and we have educational programs for the Jewish community and the health care profession.

Can you elaborate on those programs?

We have a new curriculum on spirituality and meaning in medicine that all medical students take. We have a class on physician self care. We've developed community site visits where medical students go on rounds with chaplains. And I introduced Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen's course on "The Healer's Art," which is now taught in more than 90 medical schools around the world.

In 2014, you introduced a course at Stanford Medical School called Reflection Rounds that supports the mental health of students and physicians and was hailed in Time magazine ("Doctors on Life Support," Sept. 7, 2015). What sort of program is it?

Medical students gather in small groups with physicians, psychosocial mentors and chaplains to reflect on their inner life experiences. This program is a powerful way for students to find meaning and wisdom in the pursuit of wellness.

What are the roots of your teaching?

The deep Jewish values of tikkun olam and darchei shalom — the ways of peace — which is about Judaism contributing to the greater community. These are the deepest values behind my teaching.

You were born and raised in the Detroit area. What was your Jewish upbringing?

I was not raised strongly religious but with a strong Jewish identity. When I was in my 40s, still practicing emergency medicine, I attended an international conference on Jewish medical ethics and found I had deep personal connections with Jewish traditions.

What about today — are you affiliated with a congregation?

I am a member of three congregations: Congregation Kol Emeth in Palo Alto, Beth Jacob in Redwood City and Beth Am in Los Altos. I also enjoy participating with Orthodox, Chabad and other congregations plus take part in other activities in the Jewish community.

You have said that as a chaplain, you are now "detoxified" about death. What does that mean?

I am comfortable speaking about death. It can be beautiful and bring acceptance and hope at the same time that it is sad and maybe even tragic. Over time I've come to accept not only death, but also some of the suffering and anguish around it, and that allows me to be present with patients and their families in a steady way.

What is another reward of your profession?

I get to bless newborn babies, and each one is unique. You can just look at a baby and see that it's good.

"Talking with ..." focuses on local Jews who are doing things we find interesting. Send suggestions to sueb@jweekly.com.