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Church ruling pushes reiki therapy out of hospital facility

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Hollis McGuire offered her dying mother comfort and peace through an Eastern healing technique known as reiki. "I gave my mother a lot of reiki. It was extremely helpful for her to deal with the stress," said McGuire, manager of the N.H. Small Business Development Center regional office at Daniel Webster College in Nashua and a reiki master – the highest level of training.

On March 25, Marguerite McGuire died at age 87 in her Farmington, Conn., home.

That same day, coincidentally, a committee of U.S. Catholic bishops issued guidelines that essentially forbid Catholic institutions or people representing the church "to promote or provide support for reiki therapy."

In the guidelines, the bishops contended, "Reiki therapy is not compatible with either Christian teaching or scientific evidence." They objected that reiki is based on Eastern religions and manipulation of a "universal life energy" unknown to Christian scripture or tradition.

The bishops also say that reiki "has not been accepted by the scientific and medical communities as an effective therapy."

Hollis McGuire, who describes her late mother as "a devout Catholic," is thankful that bishops didn't issue their statement before her mother died.

She's sure her mother would have abided by what the bishops said and would not have accepted reiki. Nor would the daughter have tried to talk her mother into it.

"I would be very respectful of my mother's beliefs," said McGuire, who lives in Milford.

As someone raised Catholic, McGuire said she was "startled" by the bishops' statements against this Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation.

"I don't think the people who made the ruling understand reiki," McGuire said. "This is a way to relax people and provide comfort. It's not a religion."

The national Centers for Disease Control classifies reiki as an "energy therapy" or "mind-body therapy," along with practices such as acupuncture, reflexology, therapeutic touch and aromatherapy that are "intended to affect theorized energy fields within and surrounding the

body."

There is no scientific evidence for such energy fields, and traditional medicine does not incorporate them into diagnosis or treatment.

The CDC takes no official position on reiki.

The new Catholic guidelines were signed by the eight men who comprise the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Two New England bishops were among them: Bishop Robert J. McManus, of Worcester, Mass., and Bishop William E. Lori, of Bridgeport, Conn., the committee chairman.

Bishop John B. McCormack of the Diocese of Manchester, who isn't a committee member, "supports the decision and encourages all Catholic institutions in New Hampshire to follow it," said Kevin Donovan, a diocese spokesman.

Issued from a meeting held in Washington, D.C., the guidelines quickly had a ripple effect throughout the nation, including in Nashua.

Debbie Griseuk taught reiki for years through the Parish Nurse Center for Wellness at Milette Manor at 77 Vine St. The wellness center offered low-income and other patients a variety of treatment via what its Web site describes as "a collaborative effort between Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Nashua, St. Louis De Gonzague Parish and the St. Joseph Hospital Parish Nurse Program."

Griseuk based her business, the New England Reiki Center, at Milette Manor until she was told she would no longer be permitted to use the facility because of the bishops' guidelines.

"St. Joseph's Hospital has been very good to me for many years," Griseuk said.

Griseuk said she had a great working relationship particularly with Starr Shallow, the former director of the Parish Nursing Center.

But because of the ruling, Griseuk said she had to clean out her office Monday. Although she and other practitioners offer reiki at Katie's Back in Merrimack, Griseuk is looking for a new permanent home for the center.

At Milette Manor, Griseuk and her students would offer free reiki. She worries the manor's elderly and low-income residents and other clients now will not be able to obtain the treatment.

St. Joseph Hospital was founded on the principle of not denying anyone admission or treatment based on faith, said Monsignor Stephen Worsley, the hospital's vice president for mission and ethics.

Although the hospital will no longer allow reiki to be taught at its facilities, any patient who wants to receive reiki will be permitted to, Worsley said.

Not only would St. Joseph Hospital not stop reiki treatment, but staff would also help patients find a practitioner, Worsley said. He believes that also holds true for the Parish Wellness Center, although details are still being worked out, Worsley said.

He likened it to a patient who requests an herbalist or one who seeks spiritual counseling from a Hindu priest. In those cases, St. Joseph Hospital also would try to accommodate the patients' requests, Worsley said.

As for the bishops' guidelines, Worsley said, "I think they raised some very, very interesting issues."

When health-care guidelines are issued for spiritual reasons or medical reasons, through a group such as the American Medical Association, for example, they're taken very seriously, said Worsley, who is trained as a medical doctor as well as in Catholic theology.

The bishops' guidelines prompted a dialogue across departments at St. Joseph Hospital and the decision to not host the reiki classes at the wellness center, he said.

However, some reiki practitioners and clients say the bishops' guidelines shouldn't keep Catholics from receiving a noninvasive medical procedure.

"When I first had reiki two years ago, I bought it as a Mother's Day gift to myself," said Laura Bullock, now a level 2 reiki provider, the level just below master.

Besides helping her relax and providing downtime for herself – something precious to any mother, she added – the reiki treatment gave her an infusion of energy, Bullock said.

"Come Monday, I could have painted the house, I had that much more energy," she said.

Griseuk finds it ironic that the Catholic Church, which tried Galileo as a heretic and only issued a formal apology for the affair in 2000, has questioned the science of reiki.

"Where's the science in God?" Griseuk said.

McGuire, who gave her dying mother reiki the last time they were together, doubts that a large population of her current "clients" will be deterred by the bishops' guidelines.

Some practitioners believe that reiki has shown to be an effective treatment for calming animals, and McGuire gives reiki treatment to dogs. She also trains dogs for agility and obedience competitions.

"They're not Catholic," McGuire said of her canine clients. "They won't have a problem with it."

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