

For ease, the word 'hospital' is used throughout to cover all care-giving institutions, where regardless of the level of physical care needed, each individual retains the fundamental right to personally appropriate spiritual and religious care.

Why might Pagans in hospital need support?

Being admitted to hospital can be a difficult time for anyone, even the most stoic of us. Where one person might feel relieved or gain a sense of safety from admission, another might feel fearful, not only of what is happening now, but also of what might happen next. Most people will be supported during their hospital stay by family and friends, although some may not. Yet all are made vulnerable by this need for institutional care, while those lacking an external support network are likely to be the most vulnerable of all.

Pagans admitted to hospital can expect the same level of physical and psychological support as anyone else, while the universal spiritual need to find meaning in life's difficulties may also be well-addressed by experienced clinicians and chaplaincy teams. But the particular religious needs of Pagans might not be fully recognised or understood by those caring for you, your loved one, or friend in hospital. That is where this leaflet comes in.

I'm a patient. If asked my religion, should I say I'm a Pagan/Witch/Heathen/Druid, etc?

This is always a personal decision. Some people of whatever belief answer 'none', while some label their faith (or humanist or atheistic) standpoint either broadly or more precisely. Many faith labels are listed as standard options on hospital computer systems. Often on such systems 'Pagan' is also a standard choice. However, other definitions within the Pagan sphere are unlikely to be similarly identified. Where hospitals are still using paper notes alongside computer data however, any written record might state very precisely whichever faith choice you may wish to specify.

Some people worry that declaring themselves Pagan may result in discrimination and poor care. However, professional staff are bound not only by the Human Rights Act, but also by their individual codes of conduct, which oblige them to care for individuals without discrimination regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or religion. Some staff may need a little more time than others to adjust to your spiritual and religious beliefs, but this should have no bearing on the care you receive.

Can I perform ritual in hospital?

In the same way as other faiths bring variations of ritual into hospital for the spiritual comfort of sick people, so Pagans might do the same. However, some elements of ritual are not allowed for any faith group on the basis of safety. These include candle or incense burning, or the sprinkling of salt or other substances (including water) around the bedside. The first two are hazardous in the presence of piped oxygen supplies, and the second may form a slip hazard, particularly for another vulnerable person.

It would be both polite and expedient to 'book' any ritual in advance with ward staff to ensure it does not clash with any treatment plan, to act as a guarantee of privacy and as a gesture of good will. On the same grounds, it would also be reasonable to let staff know of the approximate duration of the ritual. As a matter of privacy and consideration for both the sick person and those in adjacent beds, curtains should be firmly closed during ritual and words spoken softly. There are likely to be limits to the number of people around a bed at any one time. Alternatively, for patients able to leave the bedside, the chaplaincy area may be made available for ritual by arrangement with the chaplaincy team.

No existing rule or medical procedure prevents an individual from practising personal prayer or meditation. Any sick person is entitled to pray, meditate or carry out silent ritual as he or she is moved to.

Can I use divination, set up an altar, or have healing or other complementary therapies at the bedside?

What occurs behind the privacy of closed curtains and in the spirit of healing is between the celebrants themselves. However, while it remains acceptable for people to read the Bible or Koran on open view, it may be more expedient to keep Tarot or Runes private. No matter how honest or Earth-centred our faith, as a minority religion, Paganism still has a need to tread carefully to avoid unwitting offence to others. This means altars may be a problem on bedside tables, although a small and discreet devotional object is unlikely to become an issue. However, anything of value should remain at home unless one is prepared to deal with its loss, as small objects are easily caught up in bed linen or lost behind lockers. Theft is also an occasional problem.

Spiritual healing should be carried out behind closed curtains. The same goes for aromatherapy, reflexology or other complementary treatments, permission for which should be obtained beforehand from ward staff. Those qualified in these therapies are used to seeking permission from the outset and will be confident in doing so. Gentle hand or foot massage (where no hand or foot injury, swelling or lesion is present) may be carried out by anyone on an open ward. If another patient requests the same treatment from the care-giver or therapist, then again, permission must be sought, and perhaps declined.

If I am alone either as patient or carer, can the hospital provide a celebrant to assist me?

Hospital chaplaincy teams provide religious ritual only for the major faith groups in their catchment area, while other celebrants may be available by request. In some parts of the UK hospitals are already able to quickly contact an appropriate Pagan celebrant, but this is not yet universal. If your chaplaincy team is unable to locate a suitable celebrant for your personal religious needs, please email hospitals@paganfed.org for further assistance.

Tips for supporting someone in hospital

All individuals have a right to have religious and faith needs fulfilled.

All individuals have a right to privacy and dignity in matters of faith as well as in matters of physical health.

Openness with and clarity of intent towards professional care-givers will help support the religious and spiritual needs of a sick individual.

When visiting a sick person, remember that when people are ill they can often only tolerate 15-20 minutes of visiting at a time. However, if you're invited or need to stay longer, take frequent breaks to give both you and the sick person recovery time. Before leaving the bedside, discuss with the sick person if and when you might return.

As someone who cares, act only on the needs specified by the sick person. Try to leave your own needs at the door.

Be a good listener. Reflect often. Try not to use platitudes or solve problems. However, be prepared to be an advocate if asked, or - with permission - pass on the task to someone more suitable.

Use humour only when this is initiated by the person you are visiting; otherwise let laughter be. If laughter is right, it will happen spontaneously between you. Equally, do not be afraid of silence.

Try not to walk in the shoes of the sick person, but instead walk alongside them, making the journey with them as far as you are able.

Take care of yourself. It is harder to be an effective carer if you do not take proper time to eat, sleep and take spiritual comfort of your own.

Pagans in hospital, hospice or nursing home



The author of this leaflet is a Pagan and health professional with more than 20 years' experience in the National Health Service.

A leaflet by Pagans, for Pagans