Religious and Nonreligious Coping among Cancer Patients

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Summary
A pilot study was conducted at the outpatient clinic of the department of medical oncology of Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre. The goal was to draw up an inventory of religious and nonreligious coping strategies of patients with a life threatening disease such as cancer. Current research focuses on various forms of coping. An often neglected coping strategy is religious coping. Research in this field so far was conducted mostly in the USA. When it comes to religion and worldview the Netherlands differs from the USA in important respects. In this article we explore religious coping in the context of the Dutch society.

Keywords
coping, religious coping, nonreligious coping, cancer

1 Introduction
Cancer is the second largest cause of death in the Netherlands, after coronary heart disease. Cancer treatment is demanding and gives no guarantees of full recovery. These factors induce high levels of pressure on cancer patients and their family and friends. They have to learn to live with the threat of imminent death and the insecurity that accompanies cancer. For religious people their
faith can play an important role in the adjustment process. If they are hospitalised, spiritual carers are available to assist them in this process. However, frequently patients are treated at outpatient clinics, where spiritual care is rarely available. To respond to some extent to the absence of spiritual care in the specific context of an outpatient clinic spiritual support could be offered in the form of short-term pastoral counselling. To examine the possibility of this solution to the problem of spiritual care more insight is required into cancer patients’ coping and the role of religion in this process.

To this end we did a pilot study at the outpatient clinic of the department of medical oncology of Radboud University Nijmegan's Medical Centre as part of an evaluation of an educational programme of the Faculty of Theology at the Radboud University Nijmegen. The pilot study was meant to draw up an inventory of religious and nonreligious coping strategies of people with a life threatening disease such as cancer. Current research focuses on various forms of coping. An often neglected coping strategy is religious coping. Research in this field so far has been performed mainly in the USA (Pargament, 2001). The Netherlands differs from the USA in important respects when it comes to religion and worldview. In this article we explore religious coping in the Dutch society.

2 Dealing with Cancer: Coping

The term ‘coping’ derives from Freudian psychoanalysis. Coping was seen as a defence mechanism. Thanks to cognitive psychology this view of coping has changed radically. Nowadays coping is understood to be an active form of information processing, in which the coper is not guided by stable personal characteristics but by interaction with his/her environment (Pieper & Van Uden, 2003). There are many definitions of coping. Oosterwijk (2004, 25) combines several of these into a single definition that captures the essence of coping: “Coping is the cognitive behavioural effort that a person makes to deal with the demands of others, the situation or themselves whereby he presumes that the demands will test his capabilities or perhaps even exceed them. The aim of this effort is to control, end, reduce or tolerate the stressful situation.”

Cancer is a threatening, stressful situation that causes psychosocial strain. The coping process of cancer patients aims to reduce the strain of threatening situations and to improve the chances of recovery or at least stabilisation. Cancer patients have to learn to deal with the negative effects of their disease and try to restore their self-image and emotional balance (Oosterwijk, 2004). There are different theories to explain this mechanism. The just-world theory assumes that people believe in a just world, in which everyone receives what one deserves and deserves what one receives. This assumption not only renders