

Gens de cœur

Radiating a certain kindness in Montreal

At 80 years of age, Dr. Adalbert Jegyud has melded his callings as a Catholic priest and physician into an unorthodox palliative care practice that emphasizes care and kindness over morphine and meperidine.

The retired anesthetist spends half his week caring for the spiritual and emotional needs of patients in a palliative care unit at Montreal's Mount Sinai Hospital. The rest of his time is spent raising funds for disadvantaged children and completing a doctorate in divinity.

"I believe that practising medicine with love is more important than using medication," is the way he explains the blend of companionship, comfort and faith he provides during a patient's last days. "You have to come close to the patient, and the patient has to trust in you. If you can radiate a certain kindness, it's more worthwhile than 100 mg of Demerol."

Jegyud's approach stems from his belief that relief originates in genuine human compassion. "Physicians think that if you don't prescribe medication you haven't done your job," he says. "I sit down and hold the patient's hand, give a hug if that's what they want. I hug them and they pass away in my arms."

And it doesn't matter that half of this priest's patients are Jewish. Jegyud, who is completing a doctoral thesis on the Ten Commandments, feels compelled to assuage a patient's fear of death and suffering in the quickest way possible and has little time for artificial boundaries. "Everyone is afraid of sickness," he says. "The patient in front of me is the most important person in my life. It's nothing to do with religion. If you are Jewish or Catholic, what's the difference? The inside, which is the godly — where you tell wrong from right — that's what's important."

With this unwavering moral compass, Jegyud has navigated his way from Vienna, where he was born and completed his seminary studies, to Budapest, where he went to medical school, and to England, where he joined the Royal Air Force during World War II. Early on he realized that

medical training combined with his religious background enhanced his opportunities to help others.

There was an appetite for adventure, too. Jegyud has applied his skills in training anesthetists around the globe for the World Health Organization. He lived in Egypt, India, Denmark and Fiji — "a little paradise" — while plying his trade.

Since coming to Canada in 1956 he has had a varied and challenging career, practising at a number of hospitals until his retirement from the Reddy Memorial 6 years ago. Now

pursuing his third career, Jegyud practises "for love." Although he receives no payment for his current work, he does accept donations "for the children," a reference to his role as a fundraiser for The Sunny Side of the Street, a charitable foundation for needy children in downtown Montreal.

He became involved in that effort when a dying cancer patient asked if the priest would continue his life's work. "He asked me for a favour, like a polite man. I had nothing to do, so I said yes."

One might think that Jegyud goes where his heart leads him, but there is a plan. He has chosen a life where actions are paramount and material things don't count. He is now a member of the Alexandrian Brothers, an orthodox Catholic order located in upstate New York, about 100 km from Montreal. In joining, Jegyud renounced all possessions, including the

hand-crafted toys and Elizabethan and Tudor-style furniture he makes as a hobby. "I believe wood lives forever," is the way he explains his devotion to projects that ultimately end up in someone else's hands. "It's a material given to man by God and it has to be well treated." Although his combination of faith, altruism and medicine is complex, Jegyud's ultimate message is simple. People, he says, "have a moral responsibility to live in the society and correct its problems, not by words but by actions." — Susan Pinker, Montreal



Dr. Adalbert Jegyud: when someone is dying, love is more important than medication