As a first-time member of the scientific committee for the European Association of Palliative Care (EAPC) World Congress, I had the pleasure of watching the 2013 event taking shape from the start of the planning, over 24 months ago, to its realisation from 30 May to 2 June. Choosing the theme (‘The right way forward’), picking the plenary topics and speakers, and planning the parallel, poster, and ‘meet the expert’ sessions was a mindboggling process. But seeing the final programme roll out, with about 237 presentations, 960 posters, and 2350 participants from 92 different countries, I felt proud and satisfied. I found the Congress an inspiring and versatile event. Informal and formal opportunities to exchange and discuss issues with a great variety of people added to a general feeling of being stimulated and having fun.

Of all the excellent talks, I enjoyed Professor Carlo Leget’s plenary presentation on ‘Spiritual care in palliative care’ the most. His description of the change from a modern to a postmodern culture—a transition that is continuously taking place in multicultural Europe—and the influence of these changes on spiritual care today was fascinating. He also gave interesting insights into how we may integrate spiritual care into our daily practice, including via a helpful visual model. Picture a central region, surrounded by three additional regions. The central region symbolises a person’s spiritual dimension. The three other regions symbolise their physical, psychosocial, and cultural dimensions. Carlo explained that it is often through addressing daily preoccupations such as pain, regrets, fear, or worries that we may see a way to address a person’s deeper sense and spirituality. Physical, social, or psychological aspects of a patient’s narrative can be like doors that lead to an inner core dimension, where personal beliefs, values, and meaning are anchored.

When we explore with our patients those easier-to-grasp dimensions around the region of spirituality, we can listen for what meaning might be attached to a sentence or expression, and which deeper feelings and existential questions might be emerging from a simple statement or narrative. Thus, facilitating and engaging in such patient conversations with empathy and open-ended questions is a way to integrate spiritual care into our daily nursing practice.

Another of my personal highlights was to be able to talk about the Prague Charter, a petition calling for palliative care to be recognised as a human right. By participating in the development and launch of this petition, I learned much about inequities in health care, particularly with regard to access to palliative care. Terminal illness or approaching death may strip an individual of basic comfort, autonomy, and personal freedom. As Professor Jose M Martin-Moreno put it in his talk: ‘Palliative care restores these dignities, offering pain relief, spiritual comfort, and grief support. If health care is part of the foundation of human rights protection, then palliative care is a cornerstone, incarnating the principles that underpin the concept of human rights.’ With the launch of this petition, the EAPC urges governments globally to recognise their responsibilities in providing adequate policies to realise palliative care for all who need it.

But the petition’s aim is also to reach out to all people in the community, be they patients or family, health professionals or laypersons, educators or politicians. Everybody should understand that access to good palliative care is a right—and they should be encouraged to claim it. Everybody needs to know that millions of people suffer unnecessarily because of various barriers to obtaining effective medication, knowledge, and services. In highlighting worst-case examples, where a lack of palliative care leads to unnecessary suffering, and best-case examples, where palliative care can make a difference, we can move people and influence key decision makers to make better choices. Please share your good and bad examples by emailing them to amelia.giordano@istitutotumori.mi.it. We will be publishing them on the EAPC website so that they can be shared by others advocating for the development of and better access to palliative care. And once you’ve signed the petition at www.avaaz.org/en/petition/The_Prague_Charter_Relieving_suffering/, please ask five more people you know to sign it too—together we can make a difference!