

Doctors offered courses on faith and health

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North American believers do not need any persuading. They are demonstrating their desire to invite God onto their health-care team. The Internet is packed with prayer groups willing to take requests to the Almighty and it is swamped with individual requests for prayer, which can be taken up by anyone on line.

A Time magazine/CNN phone poll conducted last June in the United States found that 82 per cent of 1,004 adults surveyed believed in the healing power of personal prayer. And in a USA Weekend magazine poll done in February of 1996, 56 per cent indicated that faith had been a strong factor in their recovery from illness, injury or disease.

U.S. researchers are turning a previously ignored topic, the impact of religion on health, into a hot area of research. Studies published in mainstream scientific journals are showing that religion, with prayer as a component, is not only good for the soul, it is good for the mind and body. It is being credited with having a beneficial effect on everything from mortality rates to rates of depression after surgery.

"People are saying this is absolutely vital to their ability to get through difficult times," said Dr. Koenig, who is researching the effects of religion on elderly Americans and who has just published a book entitled *Is Religion Good For Your Health?*

"While the rain does fall on the just and the unjust, statistically for [church] attenders . . . it's like carrying an umbrella: Less rain is going to fall on you," said Dr. David Larson, a psychiatrist and founder of the National Institute for Health Care Research in Rockville, Md., which promotes research on religion.

Some U.S. medical schools, including such prestigious institutions as the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, have been so impressed by the research that they have begun offering courses and programs on faith and health to doctors in training. (Some doctors hope this may be another way of reducing health-care costs.)

In Canada, no medical schools offer similar programs. However, McMaster University's medical school in Hamilton held its first conference on spirituality and medicine to a standing-room-only crowd in October.

The research is compelling. In 1990, the American Journal of Psychiatry published a study that looked at the effect on elderly women after hip surgery of religious belief and church attendance, and the degree of strength and comfort drawn from God or religion. Women of faith were less depressed on discharge.

A study published in 1995 in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* found that elderly heart patients who found comfort in their faith and were socially active were 14 times more likely to sur-



Rev. Christopher White of Whitby, Ont., believes the power of prayer contributed to his 5-year-old daughter Elizabeth's speedy recovery from surgery in January. (EDWARD REGAN/The Globe and Mail)

vive surgery than their counterparts. Patients who were involved in at least one area were three times more likely to survive.

In his book, Dr. Koenig notes that religion has been found to have both direct and indirect effects on health. The direct effects include the fact that people of faith take better care of their health, so they seek earlier diagnosis and treatment of illness. And they are less likely to engage in harmful behaviour, such as abusing alcohol and drugs. The indirect effects are a reduction in emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression, and, as the heart-patient study found, increased social support.

As the heart-study researchers at the University of Dartmouth Medical School in New Hampshire noted: "It appears that there is something unique and life-protective about participating in an organized, regular social activity," be it of a religious nature or not.

Dr. Koenig agrees. "Our research has shown that just praying on your own, as opposed to praying alone and being part of a religious community, living out your faith and having a strong

belief system, is not associated with better health."

When it comes to prayer research, the study most highly touted by believers was published in 1988 in the *Southern Medical Journal*. The random, double-blind study, which was conducted in the coronary-care unit at San Francisco General Hospital, separated 393 patients into two groups. One group was prayed for; the other was not. The prayed-for group was one-fifth as likely to need antibiotics, and one-third as likely to develop fluid on the lungs.

This study was and still is scathingly criticized by skeptics. They note that the people doing the praying were given regular updates on the patients for whom they were praying.

"That alone is a violation of the double-blind technique that supposedly had been employed," said Dr. Gary Posner, founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics in Tampa and one of the most vocal critics of prayer research.

He said it also can be assumed that although the prayer group may not have been praying for half the patients, some of their friends and family were.

"In fact, it's conceivable at

least some of the patients in the control group were actually getting more prayers said for them every day than patients in the prayer group."

Dr. Dossey, who published a book last year called *Prayer is Good Medicine*, agreed during an interview from Santa Fe that there are serious problems with the quality of the prayer studies. Although he lauds the San Francisco General Hospital study in his book *Healing Words*, he also labels the results "inconclusive and inherently ambiguous."

"If he admits the shakiness of the empirical data, then he shouldn't be making empirical claims," said Barry Beyerstein, a professor of biopsychology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and chairman of the group B.C. Skeptics. (The skeptic groups operate under the umbrella of CSICOP — the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal in Buffalo, N.Y.)

Dr. Dossey countered that the best studies involve the effect of prayer on non-human subjects, including organisms of various sorts such as fungi, yeast and plants.

Of the five studies on fungi,

yeast and bacteria mentioned in *Healing Words*, only one — which did have positive results — indicates that there was a control group. For these kinds of studies to be taken seriously by the scientific community, a control group is required.

For people such as Bill Gardner, an 82-year-old self-described agnostic, all this debate is meaningless. When he learned that his 19-year-old granddaughter, Julie, was suffering from a life-threatening brain tumour, he was devastated.

When she told her father at her home in Beaumont outside Edmonton that God didn't love her any more, Mr. Gardner decided he had to act.

He wrote a letter, published in a major Toronto daily newspaper, that asked the public to pray to "Julie's God" asking Him to restore her faith in Him. (Ms. Gardner, who had surgery to remove the tumour just before Christmas, is now blind. She also has received intensive chemotherapy and radiation treatments.)

Mr. Gardner received dozens of letters and phone calls in response to his appeal. Shirley Friday of Hamilton was one of them.

"If there are complete strangers out there feeling for you and praying for you," she said, "I think it gives you some feeling of comfort."

Ms. Gardner's father said from his office in Edmonton that it has given him emotional strength to know that strangers are praying for his daughter.

"There's no way of saying how much; I wake up at night terrified," he said, his voice breaking as he choked back tears.

For whatever reason, Ms. Gardner's condition has improved a bit, her father said this week. A recent examination showed that what is left of the tumour has not grown. And Ms. Gardner, who did not speak for a couple of months because of what her father believes to be a mixture of depression, anger and confusion caused by the treatments, has started to talk again.

Mr. White said he, too, felt emotionally healed by the prayers offered for his daughter.

"I don't worry about [scientific] proof. I look out the door and my little five-year-old is just walking home from school. In half-an-hour, she's going to be bouncing around the ballet studio. It works for me."

But was there anything miraculous about little Elizabeth's recovery from surgery and her discharge after several days? Her doctor says no. "Many [children] are out of the hospital within five to 10 days. . . . That's a pretty normal recovery rate," said Dr. William Freedom, head cardiologist at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto.

But "maybe if they hadn't had the prayer vigil, she would have been here for four weeks," Dr. Freedom added. "These are the imponderables in life."