

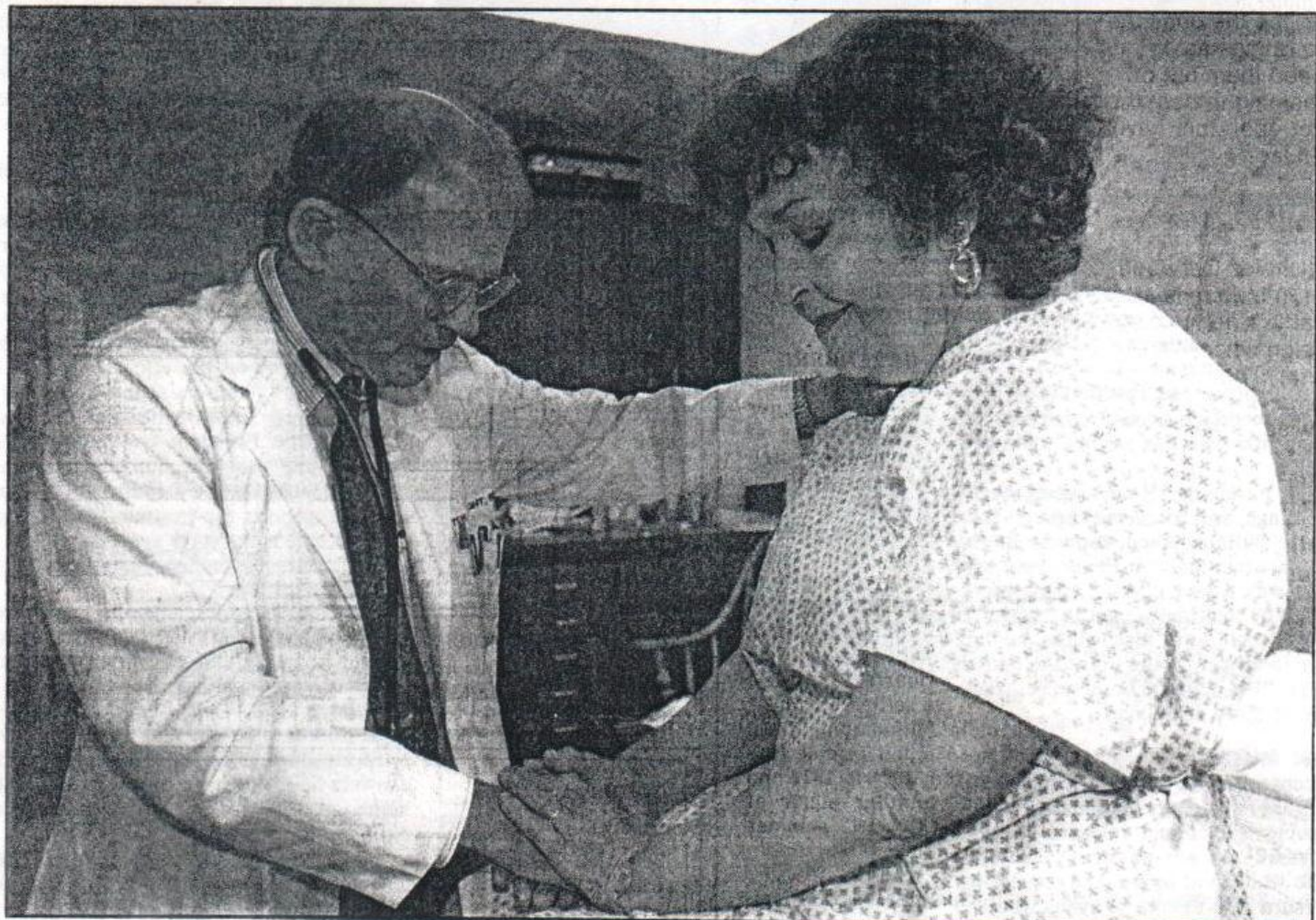
# Prescription for Prayer

TAMPA TRIBUNE 5/19/96

FRONT PAGE

“I have found there are very few atheists among the parents of dying children.”

— C. Everett Koop,  
former surgeon general



CLIFF McBRIDE/Tribune photo

Peter O. Knight prays with patient Dolly Roberts after an exam in the Tampa cardiologist's office. He says patients with strong faith tend to have shorter hospital stays and speedier recoveries.

## Doctors examine role of faith in healing

■ First of three parts

By MICHELLE BEARDEN  
Tribune Staff Writer

In the 1940s, the introduction of penicillin changed modern medicine. It was a miracle drug in the fight against chronic disease, the medical community agreed.

Now, 50 years later, some doctors are seriously looking at another agent in combating disease and disability: prayer.

That prayer actually can play a role in the healing process, along with traditional medical treatment, is something clergy

and patients have been saying for a long time. But now some doctors are coming forward with their own testimonies that prayer does work.

Consider the words of former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, a devout Christian, who was once quoted after being criticized for mixing medicine and religion by praying at a child's bedside:

“I have found there are very few atheists among the parents of dying children.”

In a recent interview, Koop says he expects to see more research on the topic. “People will start talking a lot more,

not just about mental attitudes on their bodies, but the attitude of spirituality,” he says. “Doctors ... if they're smart, use whatever the patient has to help that patient's healing.”

The winds of change in medical circles are obvious. Among them:

■ Dozens of studies on prayer and healing are cropping up, some funded by the government. Before, researchers say, it was professional suicide to even suggest such studies.

■ Up to one-fourth of the nation's 125

See PRAYER'S, Page 11



# Prayer's power on patients gaining favor

■ From Page 1

medical schools, including the University of South Florida, now offer courses that address spirituality.

■ The Templeton Foundation recently awarded "faith and medicine" grants to Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and four other schools to support teaching on health care and spirituality. Ten years ago, this would have been unheard of.

**THE HARVARD** Medical School in Boston has gotten on the bandwagon. In December, it sponsored a three-day conference on the topic, drawing nearly 1,000 scientists, physicians, psychologists, sociologists and theologians — disciplines that normally don't mix.

"If you can talk about it in Boston, then you can talk about it anywhere," says Larry Dossey, a former internist and author of the best-selling "Healing Words."

Combining medicine and spirituality is nothing new. Before medicine became an exact science, a religious presence was usually at the bedside of a patient.

The shift to pure science in healing began about 150 years ago, and continued through most of this century. William Reed, founder of the Tampa-based Christian Medical Foundation, says he has an idea why a revolution is taking root.

"Doctors felt by the time we got to the end of this century, we would have most of the answers — to infection, to cancer, to the ills of the human being," he says. "It's quite obvious we're a long way from any of those solutions."

**BUT HOW MUCH** of a solution is prayer? There is no consensus. In February, a study released by a Duke University psychiatrist found that older people who attend religious services are less depressed and are physically healthier than those who worship at home. The conclusion: Getting involved with a church or synagogue can be beneficial to one's health.

Harold Koenig, who led the study of 4,000 randomly selected people, intends to continue his research. But he says he doesn't need convincing that involvement in the religious community can reduce feelings of fear, anxiety, isolation and helplessness.

"It appears these people are better at coping," he says. "And strong evidence suggests their faith has something to do with that."

Even critics allow that much. Gary Posner, founder of Tampa Bay Skeptics, says people who believe there's a supernatural being watching



Tribune file photo

over them and helping them get better could very well make a faster recovery. He attributes that to a positive outlook, not prayer.

Posner, a former internist who now works for a medical software company, is concerned about the trend of mixing medicine with spirituality. Doctors have no business playing the role of clergy, he says.

"I could become a believer in the healing power of prayer only if consistent, peer-reviewed studies confirmed that was the case," Posner says. "And that's not happening."

**THE LANDMARK** study that opened doors to researchers was conducted in 1988 by cardiologist Randolph Byrd, then at San Francisco Gen-

eral Medicine Center Hospital. Over 10 months, 393 patients in the coronary care unit were randomly assigned to receive or not receive prayers by Protestants and Catholics they didn't know.

The results, published in Southern Medical Journal, showed that patients who received daily prayer had fewer complications and life-threatening events than those in the control group. Prayed-for patients also had less congestive heart failure, few cardiopulmonary arrests and less pneumonia. No one who was prayed for needed breathing machines; 12 in the control group did.

Since then, studies that examine spiritual factors in the health arena have been made possible by both private foundations and government agencies. Says Dossey: "You're no longer considered an eccentric if you make a proposal like this. What used to be considered quirky is now acceptable."

When the National Institutes of Health funded a \$28,797 study on the effect of prayer on alcoholics and drug abusers at the University of New Mexico, one organization said "enough is enough." The Freedom from Religion Foundation in Madison, Wis., immediately fired off a letter of protest to the Department of Health and Human Services, the institutes' parent agency.

"It's ludicrous," says spokesman Dan Barker. "What is the government doing anyway, funding religious exercises?"

And there is one danger in prayer research, even supporters agree. What if conclusions proved it simply didn't work? That goes against the whole premise of faith.

Tampa cardiologist Peter O. Knight doesn't need studies to back up his belief in prayer. Early in his career, Knight says science had all the answers he needed. He says if he couldn't put his hands on it, feel it and see it, then it just didn't exist to him.

A religious conversion in the late 1970s changed his way of thinking. Now he regularly prays with patients who request it, and says that patients with faith tend to have shorter hospital stays and quicker recoveries.

He also prays daily for divine guidance in his practice.

"It helps me to make diagnoses and do the right type of therapy," he says. "I know now that I couldn't possibly have all the answers, and some things are better left to God."

**8** Michelle Bearden's three-part report on "Prescription for Prayer" will be aired on the 6 p.m. newscast Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday on Channel 8.