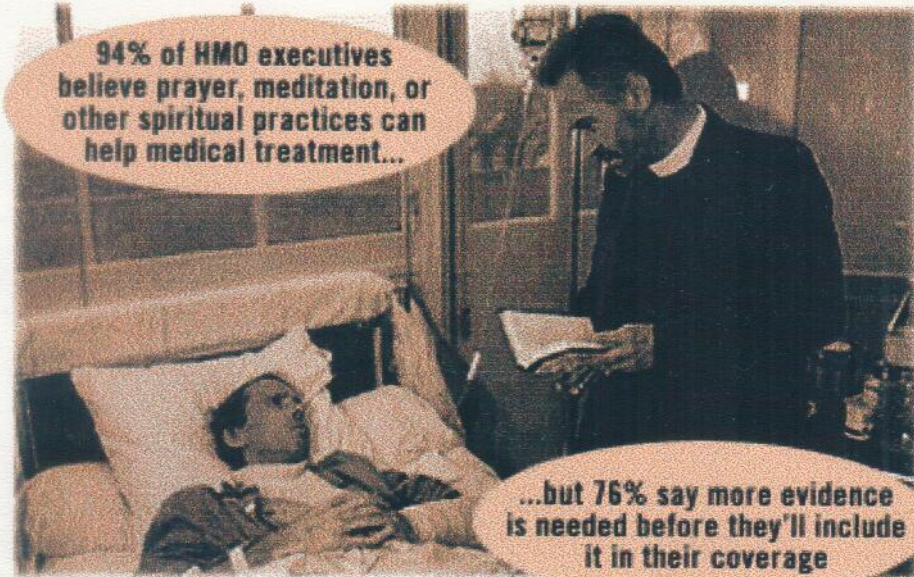


Could Spirituality Save Money?

Mixing Faith and Healing

"I don't care if 100 percent of family physicians believe that an invisible man in the sky intervenes to cure patients. That doesn't make it so."
— *Skeptic Dr. Gary Posner*



83 percent of HMO executives said relaxation and meditation should be a standard part of formal medical training.

Although executives at health maintenance organizations believe in the power of prayer, they're skeptical about covering the costs of spiritual support for patients. (PNI/ABCNEWS.com)

By Claudine Chamberlain
ABCNEWS.com

God is great, but maybe not good enough to pay for.

That's the opinion of an overwhelming majority of HMO executives, 94 percent of whom say in a new survey that they believe some type of spiritual or religious practice helps patients who are sick. Seventy-four percent are even willing to admit they think God or some higher power sometimes intervenes to help patients.

But these 300 administrators and decision-makers at the country's health maintenance organizations need proof before they put their money where their faith is: Seventy-six percent said more clinical evidence would be necessary before their health plan or hospital would pay for spiritual services for patients.

Dr. Herbert Benson, for one, is firmly convinced that it would be in an insurance company's best interest to do just that. "Sixty to 90 percent of visits to doctors are mind-body related," he says, and prayer or meditation is one way that patients can help themselves relax and heal.

'Money in the Bank'

"We've shown that we can reduce doctor visits by 50 percent" for stress-related problems, he says. "And decreased visits are money in the bank."

Benson leads the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Much of his research is funded by The John

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Templeton Foundation, which also sponsored the survey of HMO executives. Last year, the same group surveyed 269 family physicians and found that nearly all of them—99 percent—believed prayer or meditation could help patients.

Benson maintains that personal prayer or meditation has been found to be helpful for a long list of illnesses, including headaches, chest pain, asthma, cold sores, duodenal ulcers, fatigue, weight loss, congestive heart failure, nausea during pregnancy and post-operative swelling. But other medical experts are critical of Benson and say the evidence just isn't there to link prayer to relief from symptoms of illnesses.

"I don't care if 100 percent of family physicians believe that an invisible man in the sky intervenes to cure patients. That doesn't make it so," says Tampa Bay physician Dr. Gary Posner, a critic of Benson's research. "Extraordinary proof should be required before we leap to supernatural conclusions."

Mind/Body Treatment Teams

Or before backing up those conclusions with dollars. When Benson talks about providing coverage of spiritual practices, he means more than just the standard hospital chaplain or clergy member. He suggests that hospitals have teams of people specially trained in mind/body medicine to work with patients who ask for that type of treatment.

Pat Hays, chief executive officer at Blue Cross and Blue Shield System, says he understands the reluctance of health plans to cover services that don't have solid scientific track records. But, he adds, more and more research is on the way that may diminish that hesitancy.

The system that Hays heads up represents health plans that cover more than 68 million people in the United States. The decision to cover spiritual care varies from program to program, he says, but a handful are already moving in that direction.

For example, the Pittsburgh-based Highmark program covers the Dr. Dean Ornish plan for reversing heart disease. Meditation is a central element of that plan. Hays says Blue Cross and Blue Shield programs in California, Washington and Alaska have also branched out into similar types of complementary medicine.

But, he says, "they have to be careful about not implicitly or explicitly endorsing any denomination or organized religion."

Staying Secular

Kaiser Permanente, a California-based HMO, has tried to include relaxation techniques in its treatment of certain illnesses. But because the United States is such a secular society, the health plan focuses on "secularized, scientifically valid" approaches, says Dr. Marie Mulligan, who treats chronic pain patients and substance abusers in Santa Rosa, Calif.

All religions have certain values—kindness, generosity, wisdom, community—that patients may find helpful as they struggle with an illness. Nonetheless, "Kaiser Permanente is not going to cover laying on of hands at a revival circle," Mulligan says. But, she adds, "physicians are encouraged to pay attention to a patient's needs."

For example, when meeting with patients, Mulligan will ask if they have some type of spiritual support system. If they say no, she moves on to the next question. If they say yes, she encourages them to use that support to aid in their recovery.

"I work with desperate people," she says, "and sometimes I tell them that I'm praying for them." But, she says, they don't know who or what she's praying to—and that's the way it should be. ■