

THE power OF prayer

Some doctors, patients believe prayer is as vital to recovery as medicine

Stories by John Boyle
STAFF WRITER

Dr. Larry Dossey didn't always believe that prayer had any real benefit for patients. In fact...

"I was a skeptic about it for all of my professional life 'til the mid-1980s when I came across a doubleblind control study of heart patients, almost 400 of them at San Francisco General Hospital," said Dossey, an internist turned popular author and speaker. "Half were prayed for, and half weren't. The prayed-for group did much better."

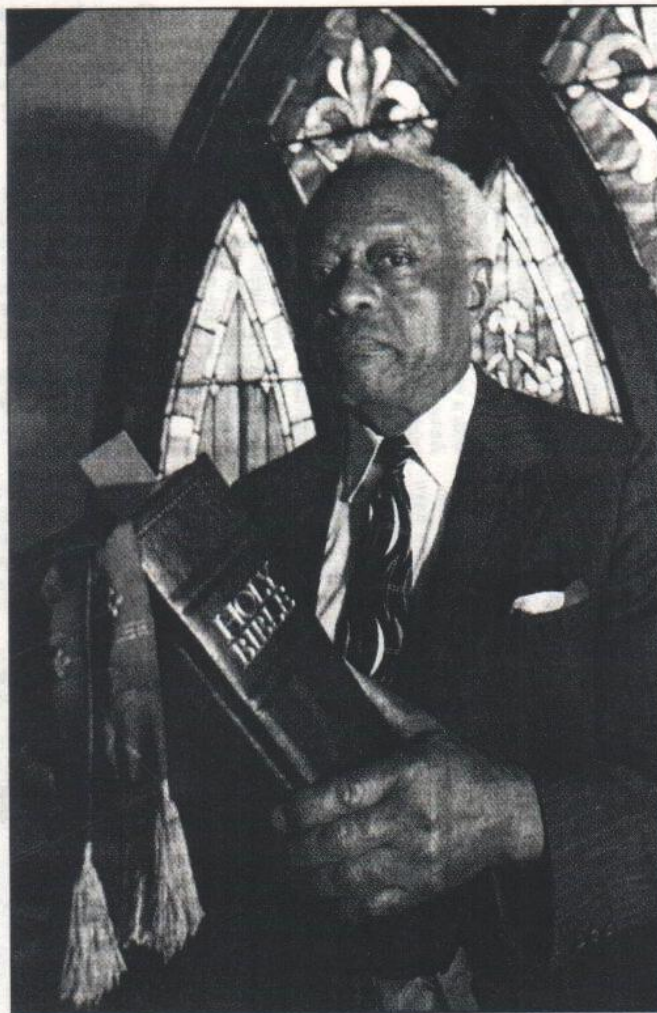
That study, Dossey says, showed a lower death rate in the prayed-for group, fewer complications and cases of pneumonia, less cardiopulmonary resuscitation required, and fewer requirements for drugs. Formerly the chief of staff at Medical City Dallas Hospital, Dossey found the study stunning.

"At that time I would not have prayed for my patients on a bet," said Dossey, who lives in Santa Fe, N.M. "So I began to ask some serious questions and hunt down every study I could. One hundred and thirty-one studies later, I decided to write a book on this."

That book, "Healing Words, the Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine," became a New York Times best-seller and launched Dossey on a second career. It's this career as author and lecturer that brings him to Asheville this Friday for a daylong seminar at the Mountain Area Health Education Center.

Dossey says half to two-thirds of the prayer studies he's looked at show "what we call statistical significance, meaning that positive changes are robust and sizable and cannot be explained by saying it just happened by chance." This often

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JOHN COULTAKIS/CITIZEN-TIMES

To the Rev. M.C. Hickman, the power of prayer is spelled out in numerous Bible verses. A Methodist raised to believe in prayer, he says it has helped him survive heart disease and cancer.

Illnesses gave him 'reason to pray'

At 77 years of age, the Rev. M.C. Hickman has seen his fair share of illness. He's endured angioplasty four times, been through open-heart surgery, had a kidney removed and recovered from cancer.

"I've had reason to pray," the Asheville resident says with a chuckle. And others have prayed for him — church members, fellow ministers. "Each time prayer has worked for me. We call it intercessory prayer."

That's the notion that your prayer can intercede in the well-being of another. Hickman, a minister at Berry

Temple United Methodist Church and its former pastor, is convinced that his church's prayer cells assisted his recoveries.

"I believe that I felt something positive going on around me, something coming from outside me," he said.

Hickman had his first incidence of colon cancer in 1989. He had heart surgery two years ago. Deep in his soul, he believes that "prayer availeth much."

"We have that assurance from the Bible," he says. "And we take it as a Biblical truth."

Prayer helps mother and daughter defy medical odds

As Anne Chenoweth-Owens puts it, "We've just been through some big things as a family."

For her, it's been a long-running struggle with bipolar disorder, a condition also called manic depression that brings with it strong highs and deep lows. For her mother, Kaye, it's been a bout with deadly malaria and two types of cancer.

They're both Episcopalians, but for nearly 25 years they've incorporated elements of Eastern religion — meditation, mindfulness — into their spiritual lives.

Kaye's health saga dates to 1988 when she went to Kenya with a group of fellow travel agents. When she returned home to Louisiana, she had malaria. After eight or nine days in the hospital, she was near death. The family had said their goodbyes. Her church group had a healing prayer service for her, with many friends and family attending.

"The next day there was an amazing turnaround in my condition," she says, describing the severe swelling that drastically improved in her legs. "There really was a physical difference."

She went on to recover from the malaria, but in 1990 Kaye was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Her doctors said she had a 3 percent chance of survival and recommended immediate surgery that would remove the pancreas and parts of the stomach and intestines.

"I kept saying I wanted to talk to somebody who'd had the surgery, and there was no one," remembers Kaye, 65.

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DEBBIE CHASE-JENNINGS/CITIZEN-TIMES

Kaye Chenoweth-Owens and her daughter Anne Chenoweth-Owens turn inward for a sense of peace, but both believe that others praying for them has made a difference in their health.

Folk musician Harry Robbins says he saw Jesus and angels in the hospital after brain surgery to relieve seizures. For him, that's indisputable evidence that prayer works.



DEBBIE CHASE-JENNINGS/CITIZEN-TIMES

Hospitalized singer 'amazed' by prayer

Get Waynesville folk musician Harry Robbins talking about the power of prayer and you best bring a chair. He'll talk for hours, but it is indeed a compelling case.

"I had seizures, really bad seizures for 26 years," says Robbins, 51. "Nobody ever knew what it was. No X-ray, no CAT scan ever showed where it was."

Sometimes the seizures were so violent Robbins would fall and bang his head. Uncontrolled and unpredictable, the seizures plagued the musician, sometimes even on stage.

His world changed in November 1996 when he went to Duke University for brain surgery. Robbins was accom-

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involves "intercessory prayer," meaning people praying for others, often when the recipients are unaware that the prayer is taking place.

Skeptics of Dossey's work say the idea is nice but the science really doesn't back up his claims, even in the San Francisco study he cites.

Dr. Gary Posner, a former practicing internist who now works as an executive for a medical software company, is one of Dossey's chief critics. He says many of the studies Dossey cites are based not on traditional science but parapsychology, the study of paranormal activity such as telepathy and clairvoyance.

"To those of us who aren't evangelical Christians or people who take things on faith, Dossey's writings lack credibility," said Posner, founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics group and editor of the Tampa Bay Skeptics Report. "Plus there's the fact that if these studies aren't conducted by evangelicals, then they're conducted by people hoping to prove that prayer does work. Unfortunately, they do not bring in us or other professionals to help tighten up some of the loopholes in the study protocols. The studies look great to them and fellow believers, but they look like Swiss cheese to us skeptics."

When skeptics are involved in establishing the study protocols and controls, "they invariably get negative results," he says.

But Dossey maintains that the science is reputable and the results undeniable. Dossey left his practice in 1988 to work on books and lectures full-time. He did incorpo-

rate prayer into his practice, praying for patients he was about to see.

"I know for a long time critics wanted to peg this as New Age and flaky, but those charges are getting harder to defend," said Dossey, who believes in a supreme being and has a deep, non-denominational spiritual life. "Three years ago there were only three medical schools in the United States that had courses devoted to the influence of religion, devotion, prayer and health. Currently, there are nearly 30 schools with courses out of about 120 medical schools in the country.

"I'm not saying the movement is taking the country by storm, but a conservative way to put this is spirituality is coming back into medicine," Dossey continued. "It's a respectable area to study, and it's being taught in the schools."

David Wilks, associate director of mental health education at MAHEC, says Dossey's reputation is "above reproach."

"His work is very clinical, and he's not a touchy-feely type presenter," Wilks said. "He's not a mystic or a swami. He's very solid in his credentials."

Dossey doesn't advocate people abandon traditional medicine and rely exclusively on prayer. Rather, he recommends prayer as a complementary approach.

The studies grabbed his eye in part because they look at prayer's effects on animals, plants — even bacteria — as well as humans. These studies on non-humans are important because the entities being studied have no awareness of prayer.

Prayer seems to be effective in about the same number of cases, half to two-thirds. In one study, researchers created wounds on the backs of mice and rats and had

people pray for half of them. The prayed-for group healed faster.

Dossey says the studies suggest that religious affiliation or culture makes no difference in prayer's effectiveness. And no hard and fast rules about the number of people praying or duration of prayer have emerged, either.

"There is one common quality — love, compassion, empathy — whatever you want to call it," Dossey said. "If an individual approaches prayer as a technical exercise, it doesn't work. Emotion seems to be crucial. If you care about it, it works."

But what about the failure rate? Why doesn't it work in some cases, even when the praying surely is heartfelt?

"I don't know why it doesn't work all the time," he said. "These studies are statistical in nature. What we mean by that is you don't see any therapy working 100 percent of the time; you see it working in a certain percentage. It's the same with prayer when you study it. It has a certain failure rate."

As to why prayer may work, that's up for discussion, unless you're a skeptic and don't believe it works at all. Dossey said theories abound, but several center around the notion of a collective consciousness people can tap into.

Of course, preachers, chaplains and others who've worked with the sick will tell you the power of prayer has been there all along.

"I'm a first-time person to let you know that God does heal through prayer," said the Rev. Curtis E. Johnson, pastor of Holy Tabernacle Church of God and Christ in Asheville.

He says the Lord has healed him of cancer diagnosed three months ago. "It makes me feel good when I hear a doctor talk from that perspective."

Odds

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Defying the odds, she recovered fully from the surgery, with the assistance of chemotherapy and radiation. But in 1994, cancer again surfaced, this time in the form of a malignant lung tumor. Once again, the surgery was successful and today she enjoys good health. She has no doubt that prayer played a key role.

"Definitely. I think the prayers from all the people have made a difference," says Kaye, who like Anne, lives and works in Asheville.

Anne's health struggles have been less apparent but equally intense. She and her husband, an Episcopal priest, lived in South Africa for years. After returning to Louisiana in 1994, Anne battled viral meningitis and typhus fever. She remembers vividly a hospital worker, a young woman, who would come in her room at night

and place headphones on Anne's heads and play gospel recordings.

"I really experienced her faith," Anne says.

The illnesses eventually cleared, unlike the persistent highs and lows of bipolar disorder. Diagnosed in 1982, Anne chose not to acknowledge the problem. She stopped taking medications and turned inward for solace, focusing on meditation and mindfulness. She noticed that while she carried her three children in the womb and nursed them after birth, the disorder remained in check. But after the hormones returned to normal, it came back with a vengeance. Three years ago, Anne sought out a local psychiatrist and began taking medications to control the disorder.

She said the clarity that came with the medicine was "like putting on glasses." While her own spirituality and meditation continue to play a key role in her well-being, Anne acknowledges that others' prayers also helped.

"When you are not able to pray

for yourself, it's good to know that people are praying for you," says Anne, 39. "Knowing about it is also helpful."

Neither she nor her mother endorse abandoning traditional medical treatments and relying strictly on prayer. But they both believe it helps.

"I am a skeptic and have been and probably will continue to be," Anne says. "But it's really a nice thing to know, even for a skeptic, that we have that tool in the toolbox."

Singer

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panied by family and his preacher, the Rev. Rob Furgus of Long's Chapel United Methodist Church in Lake Junaluska. The surgeon also was a Christian man who "had all the doctors gather around the bed and join hands in prayer" before Robbins' surgery, as he describes it.

"He woke me and tears were rolling down his face, and he said, 'Harry, go rest,'" Robbins recalls.

While the seizures stopped, Robbins endured intense pain in the hospital. Strapped in bed in the intensive care unit, Robbins was sedated but the medicine didn't help much.

"All of the sudden everything was dark, and I saw two glasses of wine, a table and Jesus," Robbins says. "He said, 'You are not to worry over this.' All of a sudden the pain was gone from me."

Throughout his stay, Robbins saw angels in the floor tiles and the apostles in a wall hanging. He knows he was on medications, but he believes wholeheartedly the images were real.

Robbins recovered fully, even regaining his ability to play guitar. While hospitalized, he received hundreds of cards from well-wishers, many of whom noted that they were praying for him.

"It's amazing how much I was prayed for in that hospital," he

says. He believes the prayers and God are responsible for the peace of mind and good health he now enjoys.

"God directs things in God's time, in his way," he says.