



Can Prayer Heal?

Scientists Suggest Recovery May Be the Hand of God at Work

Aug. 13

High in the Himalayas of Nepal, Kopan Buddhist Monks are praying for a man named "Jimmy P."

Halfway around the world, American Sufi Muslims join in. Fundamentalist Christians add their prayers, as do Orthodox Jews at Jerusalem's Western Wall.

"Jimmy P," a heart patient at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina, is part of a global scientific experiment trying to find out: Does prayer heal?

The experiment was launched by Dr. Mitch Krucoff, a cardiologist at Duke University Medical Center.

"If in addition to all the prayer routinely going on all the time, we were to add prayers from religious groups all over the world focused on one individual's recovery, is there a measurable incremental benefit?" he wondered. So he is putting prayer to the test in a global scientific study that is scheduled to be completed next year.

Putting Faith to the Test

In the meantime, other scientists are taking a look at the 191 studies that have already been done on what they call "remote healing."

One such study was conducted at the Mid America Heart Institute in Kansas City, Mo. At first, Dr. William Harris had a hard time persuading a fellow cardiologist, Dr. James O'Keefe, to participate in the prayer experiment on heart patients.

"From a purely scientific standpoint, I thought it was illogical," says O'Keefe. "I don't really think of spirituality normally as playing a role in scientific, rigorous, double-blind placebo-controlled scientific studies. It's two different realms."

A previous study by some other scientists had gotten positive results, and Harris wanted to study remote healing for himself. But he, too, was skeptical.

"We were even doubtful that the phenomena itself was real," he says, "that prayer could do anything."

So Harris wanted to make his experiment impervious to any placebo effects. He did not tell patients they were being prayed for or even that they were part of any kind of experiment. For an entire year, about 1,000 heart patients admitted to the institute's critical care unit were secretly divided into two groups. Half were prayed for by a group of volunteers and the hospital's chaplain; the other half were not.

All the patients were followed for a year, and then their health was scored according to pre-set rules by a third party who did not know which patients had been prayed for and which had not. The results: The patients who were prayed for had 11 percent fewer heart attacks, strokes and life-threatening complications.

"This study offers an interesting insight into the possibility that maybe God is influencing our lives on Earth," says O'Keefe. "As a scientist, it's very counterintuitive because I don't have a way to explain it."

A Miracle or Simply Chance?

Dr. Elizabeth Targ, a psychiatrist at the Pacific College of Medicine in San Francisco, has also tested out prayer on critically ill AIDS patients.

All 20 patients in the study got pretty much the same medical treatment, but only half of them were prayed for by spiritual healers. Ultimately, 10 of the prayed-for patients lived, while four who had not been prayed for died.

In a larger follow-up study, Targ found that the people who received prayer and remote healing had six times fewer hospitalizations and those hospitalizations were significantly shorter than the people who received no prayer and distant healing.

"I was sort of shocked," says Targ. "In a way it's like witnessing a miracle. There was no way to understand this from my experience and from my basic understanding of science."

Dr. Deepak Chopra, who is well-known for his insights on science and spirituality, says these prayer experiments are proving what he's been saying all along: There are healing forces in nature that science is only beginning to understand.

"What physicists are saying to us right now," he says, "is that there is a realm of reality which goes beyond the physical & where in fact we can influence each other from a distance."

But the final verdict on prayer is still not in, says Dr. Gary Posner, a skeptic of remote healing who says most prayer studies to date have been sloppy and untrustworthy.

"I suspect that 50 years from now people looking back at this genre of prayer research will kind of shake their heads and call it junk science."

Chance alone, he says, might account for the effect that they thought was due to the prayer.

But Chopra says he is just glad science is taking the belief seriously enough to want to study it.

"At the moment, I would agree that some of these studies are tentative, that we should be cautious in the way we interpret the results," says Chopra. "But the studies are encouraging enough that we should pursue them, because if we don't, we may have missed one of the most amazing phenomena in nature."

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures