

Prayer Heals – *Your Health* April 1994 article:

Why Prayer Is Great Medicine

Studies have shown that it really can work miracles

By Mary Ellen Hettinger

In today's scientifically and statistically oriented world of medicine, miracles and medicine rarely mix – and when they do, doctors refer to these spontaneous, unexpected cures as “remissions.” To the scientific eye, if results can't be proven in a series of double-blind, randomized studies subject to rigidly controlled criteria, the evidence is “anecdotal,” that is, not worth much more than hearsay.

But Larry Dossey, MD, former chief of staff of Humana Medical City in Dallas and current co-chairman of the National Institutes of Health's newly formed Office of Alternative Medicine, believes differently. In fact, he believes that prayer has the power to heal and should be used to complement the physicians' arsenal of traditional medical healing techniques.

Sound farfetched? Dossey has compiled over a hundred laboratory studies that prove his theory. And, considering that doctors in operating rooms and who work with comatose patients are gradually accepting that positive statements made during surgery and to unconscious patients can affect the patients' outcome positively, Dossey's proposals don't seem so far removed.

Surely the scriptwriters of *Ghostbusters II* didn't anticipate this development when they concocted the scene where neon orange “slime” reacts to negative vibes by churning and boiling violently, and that the reverse – good vibes from upbeat music (Jackie Wilson's version of *Higher and Higher*) – could make a slime-filled toaster dance across a pool table. (Paranormal researchers Ray and Egond termed this plasma a “psycho reactive substance” in the movie.)

But this is the age where science fiction is proving science fact. And, in several studies where prayer was used against microscopic organisms, such as germs, noticeable effects were recorded.

Although you generally won't find these studies in medical journals, Dossey noted, “a number of studies have researched the effects of [spiritual] healing on fungi, yeast or bacteria:”

- When 10 subjects consciously concentrated on inhibiting the growth of fungi in lab cultures, 151 of the 194 culture dishes showed a slower growth rate several hours later.
- Sixty university volunteers attempted to influence nine test tubes filled with bacteria to genetically change into another strain. The bacteria did mutate as “directed,” instead of as they naturally would, into different strains.

These are only a few of the studies cited by Dossey. In a sense, the placebo effect – where a drug or substance appears to work only because of a patient’s belief that it does – is a precursor of the power of prayer, which the world’s great religions have preached all along.

But Dossey, writing in his book *Healing Words* (HarperCollins, 1993), goes beyond this to say that your doctor’s attitude has an influence on your health as well, and that his or her positive beliefs and prayer can be a vital adjunct to his or her prescriptions or treatments.

As an example, Dossey referred to research done by Jerry Solfvin who did three double-blind studies of vitamin E as a treatment for angina pectoris (chest pain associated with disease of the coronary arteries). The doctor who believed in and vigorously talked up the benefits of the vitamin to his patients found it “significantly effective” in treating their pain, while skeptical doctors involved in two other studies reported that E had no effect.

That prayer can help heal human subjects was demonstrated by cardiologist Randolph Byrd and reported in the *Southern Medical Journal* in 1986. Designed as “a scientific evaluation of the role of God in healing,” Dossey explained, Byrd’s 10-month study of almost 400 patients in the coronary care unit at San Francisco’s General Hospital showed remarkable results.

Byrd’s rigid criteria mimicked typical medical clinical studies and was a randomized, double-blind experiment in which no one – not the patients, the nurses or doctors – knew which of two groups patients were in. One group was prayed for by home prayer groups (192 patients), while the second group of 201 patients were not prayed for by these groups.

The pray-ers were given a brief description of each patient’s diagnosis and condition, and each patient in the prayed-over group had between five and seven people praying for them.

Afterward, the study revealed these differences between the two groups:

- The patients who were prayed for were five times less likely to need antibiotics;
- Were three times less likely to experience pulmonary edema (when the lungs fill with fluid because the heart is not pumping effectively);
- None needed to be on mechanical ventilators, whereas 12 of the unprayed-for group required assistance in breathing;
- And fewer of the patients who were supported by prayer died.

“If the technique being studied had been a new drug or a surgical procedure instead of prayer,” Dossey said, “it would almost certainly have been heralded as some sort of

'breakthrough'. Although many physicians still expressed skepticism, this carefully controlled experiment created a sensation.

It was this study that provided the impetus for Dossey to discover whether "this study stood alone, or if there were other things out there." The result, five years and 130 scientific studies later, was his book. "The evidence is simply overwhelming that prayer functions at a distance to change physical processes in a variety of organisms, from bacteria to humans," he concluded.

And, although his book may create waves in the medical community ("Take two of these and I'll pray for you three times a day," a futuristic prescription might read), it's something spiritual people have known all along. As Sir Francis Galton, an eminent British scientist wrote in 1872, according to Dossey, "The most persuasive reason to believe that prayer works is the indisputable fact that everyone uses it."