

Subject: Scientific Investigation into the Power of Prayer

Tucson, Arizona Thursday, 8 May 2003

UMC to test power of prayer to help heal

By Carla McClain
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The power of spiritual prayer to heal traumatic injury - long a belief in religions worldwide - will now be put to tough scientific testing in Tucson to see if it really works.

Starting this week, dozens of University of Arizona patients undergoing open-heart surgery will be the target of special prayers, to see if they will ease their pain and speed their healing.

The patients will not know and will never see the people praying for them. They won't even know if anyone is praying for them.

But the chief of surgery at University Medical Center thinks there may be a chance the prayed-for patients will do better than those without the prayers.

"I'm a surgeon, and I'm interested in the scientific outcome of surgical therapies and the use of advanced technologies," said Dr. Allan Hamilton, who, as a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon, is hardly a hocus-pocus kind of guy.

"But we can't forget that these are human beings in our care. In my practice, I have seen that patients who are spiritually and emotionally connected do very well in their recovery. What we want to find out is if there is scientific validity to this - yes or no."

And if it works - if somehow patients do actually benefit from what is known as "distant prayer" or "remote healing" - it will mean that "some form of human psychic energy does have a healing effect," said Tucson psychiatrist Dr. Mavis Donnelly.

"Right now, there is no scientific explanation whatsoever for how such a thing would work. The jury is completely out on this one," said Donnelly.

"The downside is that if the results come back that prayer makes no difference, that's going to be kind of a clunker for the believers."

The UA project - funded through several hundred thousand dollars from the National Institutes of Health - is the first scientifically designed study of the role of prayer in the healing of surgical patients ever done in this country.

But it is not a total shot in the dark.

It follows several smaller studies in the past two decades that indicate that even "distant prayer" does indeed benefit patients with serious illnesses and injuries.

The most famous of these, done in 1986, involved some 400 heart disease patients at San Francisco General Hospital who were split into two groups -with half the patients prayed for over a 10-month period by various religious home-prayer groups and the other half not.

In the end, the prayed-for patients were five times less likely to need antibiotics, and three times less likely to suffer lung complications. None of the prayed-for patients needed to use an artificial breathing machine, while 12 in the control group did.

"These were significant effects in medical heart patients," said Hamilton. "Now we want to evaluate what happens with surgical heart patients."

In the UA study, some 120 patients slated to undergo cardiac bypass surgery in the coming months also will be divided into two groups - 60 of them randomly selected to be the target of a series of prayers, to be compared with 60 bypass patients without prayers.

At the end of the study, about two years from now, several specific recovery factors will be evaluated - how chest wounds healed, how long patients spent in intensive care, whether they needed artificial ventilation, and whether they suffered heart arrhythmias or infections, Hamilton said.

Praying for the UA patients will be practitioners of what is known as Johrei, a spiritual healing practice that originated in Japan. Central to Johrei is the belief that a universal energy can be channeled through prayer to heal the human spirit, which in turn can heal the physical body.

Along with spiritual healing, Johrei focuses on a healthy lifestyle, especially eating a non-toxic diet, and surrounding one's life with art and beauty.

Although it is considered a religion, it is nondenominational, and is practiced by members of all faiths, including Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and others.

Johrei was chosen for the UA study because there is a large Johrei center in Tucson, with nearly 200 members, who have agreed to use a uniform prayer ritual for all patients in the study.

"We could have used regular Christian church prayer groups, but we needed a uniform prayer protocol, and Johrei has that," said Hamilton. "Also, what if a patient is Jewish and finds himself in a study with a Catholic priest? We wanted to avoid those kinds of conflicts."

Johrei members will not be told the names of the patients - only their sex and age, the date and time of their surgeries, and how many arteries will be involved in the bypass.

They will conduct three 27-minute prayer sessions on the day of each patient's surgery - one during surgery, one while the patient is in the recovery room and the third after the patient has been moved to a hospital bed.

Prayer sessions will then be held once a day for the next three days after surgery.

"We won't go to the hospital - the Johrei will be done here at the center," said Carol Martin, a volunteer lay leader at the Tucson Johrei Fellowship Center. "We will focus on the heart and on the arms and legs, where the grafts will be taken.

"We call it prayer and action, and we will do it for anyone who asks for it."

One of those who asked was Gerry Nangle, 52, who several years ago was in a serious car accident with her two young children. Her then-6-year-old son, Dominic, fractured his skull and was unconscious, not breathing and losing blood and spinal fluid from his ear when paramedics arrived.

At the UMC trauma center, Dominic was diagnosed with multiple head injuries. Nangle's husband summoned a Johrei friend, who asked doctors to hold off on operating on Dominic to remove fluid dangerously building up in his brain, Nangle said,

After Johrei prayers over Dominic through the night, the child was scanned again in the morning, and the doctors found the brain injury -

including evidence of a stroke - was gone.

UMC documents confirm the surprise finding.

"The doctors told me the machine must be broken, and they'd have to operate anyway," said Nangle. "But finally they agreed they did not need to, and Dominic woke up a few hours later and was playing Nintendo games that afternoon."

Today, Dominic Reece is a National Merit Scholar finalist at University High School.

While coming under increased study in medical science, healing prayer also is re-emerging in mainstream churches today, said the Rev. Stuart Taylor, co-pastor at St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson.

Many churches, including St. Mark's, are holding regular healing services once found only in the pentecostal or evangelical wing of American religion.

"Someone last week came in with a concern about a family whose child has incurable cancer, so we held a healing service, laying hands on her and praying for him through her," Stuart said. "I don't really know if the family knew about it."

There is a merging now of science and faith, both exploring the "unity of mind and body, the role of our spirit or soul" in healing, Taylor said.

"There is beginning to be a dynamic between quantum physics and spiritual theologies to find a common language to describe what is happening here - how you can change the energy to impact a life," he said.

"It's not that you call on God, and he pulls a string and something happens - it's not that simplistic."

And it does not really matter if the healing prayer follows Johrei or Christian or any other particular tradition, Taylor believes.

"To me, the bottom line is that God has endowed the creation with a healing capacity, and many cultures and religions are aware of that, and draw on it.

"We have no lock on this."