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Distant prayer doesn't help heal, finds largest study yet

It was associated with higher complication rate after heart surgery

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Here's an imponderable: The largest effort so far to measure the power of distant prayer to heal the sick found it didn't help - and in one curious respect, prayer was associated with poorer outcomes, researchers said yesterday.

Doctors who followed 1,800 heart bypass patients at six medical centers found that those who knew they were being prayed for had higher rates of complications than those who weren't sure.

Cautioning that they don't know what, if anything, to make of the finding, some doctors speculated that telling patients on the eve of surgery that people were praying for them might not be a good idea. It could put them under increased pressure to heal.

"Our study design does not allow us to draw firm conclusions," said Jeffery A. Dusek, a Harvard University psychologist who directed the study. "Is it random or real? We don't know, but any significant findings beg for more explanations."

But for some who regularly pray for people they don't necessarily know, there is no scientific inquiry that can prove their efforts fruitless.

"This is a very hard thing to measure," said Sister Patricia Scanlon, one of many Carmelite nuns at a Towson monastery who regularly ask God to heal strangers.

"We pray for complete healing, and sometimes that takes different forms. It could be spiritual healing, or sometimes an attitude, an acceptance, a preparedness, maybe not being physically healed."

The \$2.8 million study, which appears today in the American Heart Journal, is the latest and most ambitious to examine the thorny question of whether distant prayer is beneficial.

It was funded largely by the John Templeton Foundation, whose philanthropist founder has poured millions into attempts to apply principles of scientific research to the spiritual realm.

Researchers urged caution about drawing conclusions from today's report.

"Our study was never intended to address the existence of God or the presence or absence of intelligent design in the universe," the Rev. Dean V. Marek, head chaplain at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and one of the study's investigators, said in a statement.

Doctors randomly assigned patients to three groups. One group was told it might be the object of distant prayer, and it was. Another group was told the same thing, but it wasn't. And the third was promised it would receive prayer and did.

The first two groups had nearly the same complication rates, about 50 percent. But the third group suffered complications in 59 percent of cases. Atrial fibrillation accounted for most of the problems.

The condition, which is usually controlled with medication, is marked by an uncontrolled fluttering of the heart's upper chamber. If left unchecked, it can cause a stroke but usually resolves in a few weeks.

Dusek said the study was not designed to answer why medical outcomes might be worse in one group than another - and that it might even be wrong to speculate. But he said some investigators couldn't help wondering whether the patients who were certain of prayer suffered "performance anxiety or felt doubtful about their outcome." he said.

"Am I so sick that they had to call in the prayer team?" Dusek said, imagining the feelings of those patients.

Then again, he said, the higher complication rate might simply have been a chance occurrence.

Marek, of the Mayo Clinic, said he doesn't put much stock in so-called intercessory prayers, in which strangers ask God to heal the sick. Better to place the patient's care in God's hands and leave it at that.

"Anything beyond that, and I'm trying to control the outcome of your life, your surgery," Marek said. "I don't think that works."

Besides, he said, hospitals are filled with "thousands of people" who are trying to help patients get better. "That's intercessory prayer," he said.

While some earlier studies did report measurable clinical effects of prayer, critics have found flaws in their methodology.

The last experiment, in which Duke University researchers enrolled 750 patients undergoing heart-related procedures, found that distant prayer had no effect on whether patients experienced complications such as heart attack, death or readmission to the hospital.

In that study, prayers were offered by representatives of Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist faiths.

In the larger study reported today, prayers were offered by only Catholic and Protestant groups. Researchers assigned each prayer group patients, instructing them to begin praying on the eve of surgery and to continue daily for two weeks.

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