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Largest Study of Prayer to Date Finds It Has No Power to Heal

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The largest study yet on the therapeutic power of prayer by strangers has found that it provided no benefit to the recovery of patients who had undergone cardiac bypass surgery.

In an unexpected twist, patients who knew prayers were being said for them had more complications after surgery than those who did not know, researchers reported Thursday.

The complications were minor, and doctors surmised that they could have been caused by the increased stress on patients worried that their conditions were so bad they needed prayers.

Father Dean Marek, a Catholic priest who was involved in the research, said he wasn't surprised by the results.

"I am always a little leery about intercessory prayer," said Marek, director of chaplain services at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. "What we have in mind for someone else may not be what they have in mind for themselves.... It is clearly manipulative of divine action and personal choice."

Dr. Herbert Benson, associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and one of the study's lead researchers, added: "Nothing this study has produced should interfere with people praying for each other."

Some scientists hoped the results of the \$2.5-million study, conducted at six U.S. medical centers, would bring an end to the long controversy over therapeutic prayer.

"There have now been two big studies, with hundreds and hundreds of patients, that show no effect," said Dr. Harold G. Koenig, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University. "Let's move on now and direct our money somewhere else."

Some believers in prayer concurred.

Sister Carol Rennie, prioress of St. Paul's Monastery in St. Paul, Minn., whose prayer group participated in the study, said faith couldn't be scientifically analyzed. "God must be smiling broadly," she said. "It tells me, frankly, that God's way of working with people is a mystery and that technology really can't determine the effects of prayer."

Scientists have been trying for at least a decade to determine whether organized prayer on the

behalf of others can influence the outcome of medical treatment.

Previous attempts, however, were flawed by experimental and methodological errors that led critics to dismiss findings, both pro and con.

Thursday's study was intended to settle the matter in the most scientific manner possible. It was funded primarily by the John Templeton Foundation, a group based in Pennsylvania that encourages the study of spirituality and science. Results will be published next week in *American Heart Journal*.

The study was designed as a randomized and blinded trial, meaning that most patients did not know whether someone was praying for them or not. Such trials are considered the gold standard for scientific proof.

More than 1,800 patients were divided into three groups: those who were told someone was praying for them; those who were told only that someone might pray for them and got prayers; and those who were told someone might pray for them but received no prayers. About 65% of the patients said they strongly believed in the power of prayer.

Two Catholic monasteries and one Protestant group offered the prayers. They were given patients' first names and the first initial of their last names. The groups started praying the night before surgery and continued for two weeks.

All members of the prayer groups recited the same intercession, asking for "a successful surgery and a quick, healthy recovery and no complications."

Researchers said they didn't ask family members of the sick people to stop praying because it would have been unethical to do so, meaning some people received more prayers than others.

The results showed that prayers had no beneficial effect on patients' recovery 30 days after surgery. Overall, 59% of patients who knew they were being prayed for had complications, compared to 51% of the patients who did not receive prayers. The difference was not considered statistically significant.

Atrial fibrillation, a fluttering of the heart that can be related to stress, was the most common complication in all groups but was more likely to occur among patients who knew others were praying for them.

All groups were just as likely to develop infections or die.

"We conclude that telling people introduces the stress response," said Dr. Charles Bethea of Integris Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City and a study researcher.

He surmised that patients thought, "Am I so sick that they had to call in the prayer team?"

Dr. Richard P. Sloan, a professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia University School of

Medicine, who was not involved in the research, said the study underscored the futility of trying to measure the power of prayer.

One problem in the study, he said, was that in addition to the organized prayer, some patients prayed for themselves and received prayers from families, friends, people they work with or their congregations.

"They have absolutely no idea how much prayer individuals in any of the groups received," Sloan said. "If we can't know that, we can't draw any conclusions whatsoever about the intervention."

Bob Barth of Silent Unity, the prayer organization in Lee's Summit, Mo., that was the Protestant group involved in the study, said the results didn't shake his confidence in prayer. "People of faith don't need a prayer study to know that prayer works," he said.

But Koenig said clinical trials would never answer that question. "Science is powerful and wonderful in determining the orbit of the Earth, the speed of a bullet, the power of a new drug. But now we've asked science to study something that occurs outside of space and time.

"This shows you shouldn't try to prove the power of the supernatural," he said.