

FOCUS: HEALING

Medicine's new faith connection

Doctors and hospitals are increasingly turning to the power of religion to promote healing and wellness. But the partnership has some observers feeling a little queasy.

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HARRY SCULL JR./Buffalo News The Rev. Kathleen Derushia, pastor of Abiding Savior Lutheran Church in North Tonawanda, said faith has helped her live with cystic fibrosis into her 30's, outliving most who have the disease.

Health care professionals for years have struggled to slow some of the Buffalo Niagara region's most chronic health problems: heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer.

Now they're turning to a powerful ally for help - faith.

The increased mingling of spirituality and health includes new wellness programs linking the local medical community with area houses of worship, churches offering HIV testing and medical students studying the role of spirituality in healing.

Doctors pray more often with their patients, and a local hospital and nursing home train clergy to help their congregations handle serious illnesses.

But some critics worry that the collaborations could go too far, with religion being foisted on vulnerable people who don't want it.

Fueling the collaboration of faith and medicine is an expanding body of research that suggests religion and good health go hand in hand.

"We sort of put spirituality out," said Dr. Leeland A. Jones, a local psychiatrist. "Now we're realizing you can have all of the technology in the world, but we've neglected the soul in psychiatry and in medicine in general."

Some medical professionals view religious communities as an untapped resource in their efforts to tackle the deadliest health concerns in the area.

The Research Center for Stroke & Heart Disease at the Jacobs Neurological Institute, headquartered in Buffalo General Hospital, started working with churches in 2001 as a novel way to combat cardiovascular disease - the No. 1 killer in Buffalo Niagara.

"There's something wrong if the rates are continuing to go up," said Gretchen Fierle, vice president of the center.

At a medical conference in Albany, Fierle met a Baptist minister and nurse practitioner who explained a program

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in New York City that brought medical professionals and churches together to address heart disease there.

Fierle and Dr. Frederick Munschauer III worked through Buffalo General Hospital's pastoral care director, Rev. Richard H. Augustyn, to find pastors who would help implement "Moving in Faith" - an intensive wellness program including exercise and better eating - in their congregations.

When a dozen or so ministers showed up for a meeting, Munschauer admitted that "the medical community had failed them" in efforts to reduce heart disease and stroke, said Fierle.

Six churches signed up for the pilot study. This year, the center is working with 20 faith communities in and around Buffalo. In the fall, the American Heart Association will begin a similar project.

Tapping churches' reach

The program, "Search Your Heart," will be aimed at reducing high blood pressure and cholesterol, and preventing diabetes. So far, 25 churches have signed up.

The organization hopes to build "communities of wellness" through churches, where people "seem to be more open and willing to listen and learn," said Mary Craig, senior director of minority health initiatives at the heart association.

"You have a huge community that is looking for something and goes to church for those answers," said Craig.

"You have more churches in Buffalo than in almost any other place in the country," she added.

If it weren't for her church, Genevieve Richardson doubts she would have become involved in an exercise program on her own.

"The likelihood of it would be slim," she said.

But for the past few months, Richardson has been sweating nearly as much as she prays at Bethesda World Harvest International Church.

Four or five times a week after prayers, the Erie Community College student retreats to the basement of the Main Street church for an hour of tae bo and elliptical training.

The routine is part of her participation in the stroke center's "Moving in Faith" program, and Richardson hopes it will ward off diabetes, a condition common in her family.

"We have a mission statement in our church: 'We're a body of believers who serve in the spirit of excellence by doing the little good things consistently.' It helps you to live healthier," she said.

Research on the role of religion and spirituality in health and patient care has expanded dramatically over the past decade, much of it funded by private foundations.

At Harvard Medical School, scientists are currently studying whether intercessory prayer - prayer said on behalf of others - has any effect on people recovering from illness. The researchers expect to reveal their findings in a peer-reviewed journal.

The John Templeton Foundation in Pennsylvania funded the controversial study with a \$2 million grant.

The Rev. Kathleen Derushia has little doubt her faith has played a role in her ability to live with cystic fibrosis into her 30s.

When she was born in 1969 with the genetic disease, doctors told her parents that their baby girl wouldn't live

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to attend kindergarten. The affliction is marked by the accumulation of a thick mucus that clogs the lungs and leads to life-threatening infections.

Derushia has survived several dangerous lung infections and frequent extended hospital stays, outliving most people who have the disease.

"Has my faith brought my healing, or has my healing brought my faith? The answer is yes," said Derushia, who serves as pastor of Abiding Savior Lutheran Church in North Tonawanda. "I think some of the times I came through was because there were enough prayers out there."

It is becoming more difficult for the medical establishment to look askance at such ideas.

Religion and spirituality's relationship to health and medicine has gained a foothold in prestigious medical teaching facilities.

One of the leading researchers in the field, Dr. Harold G. Koenig, founder and director of the Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health at Duke, spoke in April about the healing power of faith during a lecture at Roswell Park Cancer Institute and privately with medical students.

Koenig advocates that physicians take "spiritual histories" of their patients and include spirituality in their care - as a way to treat the patient beyond symptoms.

New programs start locally

Despite lingering skepticism, other signs indicate that faith and spirituality are getting more consideration from area health professionals.

Lutheran Campus Ministries at the University at Buffalo sponsored a seminar series last semester that drew an average of 25 doctors and medical students to discuss

topics such as "Prayer and Healing" and "Why Spirituality Needs to Be Addressed in Patient Care."

"People are whole beings, they're not just the body," said Dionne Dillon, a medical student at UB who helped organize the series. "I know my faith is important to me and its impact on my life. I realize it can be just as important for other people."

Some churches have started offering testing for HIV and prostate cancer for their members.

"It's an integral part of our ministry now," said Pastor Roderick Hennings of Zion Dominion Church of God in Christ, on Genesee Street.

Roswell Park is offering a new comprehensive pastoral care visitors training program with 22 weeks of lectures and clinical training for church leaders interested in working with sick, hospitalized or dying people.

Call for "secular counselors"

All the attention to faith and spirituality in providing health care could have a negative effect on ill people who aren't religious, some critics argue.

Joe Beck, a certified social worker who works for the Council for Secular Humanism in Amherst, doesn't doubt that the support a patient receives from a doctor and network of family, friends and health care providers is crucial to the patient's recovery.

But there are limits, he said.

"There's no evidence which says a Christian support group is any better than a secular humanist support group," he said.

Beck worries that the interjection of faith or religion into the treatment of a nonreligious patient would make the patient extremely uncomfortable and impair his recovery.

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To prevent that in hospitals, at least, Beck wants area hospitals to appoint "secular counselors" as part of the pastoral staffs - in addition to priests, ministers and rabbis.

The counselors could better relate to nonreligious patients, he said.

But physicians like Jones, who doesn't shy from incorporating spirituality into his care of patients, say they don't force their beliefs on anybody.

"Anything you impose on a human being is ineffective and wrong," said Jones, who said many of his patients come to him because of his willingness to involve faith in treatment.

Dr. William Holley Jr., a podiatrist who also serves as pastor of St. James Missionary Baptist Church on Main Street, admits that he enjoys his work as a minister more than practicing medicine.

But he said he knows the boundaries.

"I'm not supposed to be making believers out of those who don't believe," he said. "All I'm supposed to do is demonstrate the light of Christ."

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