

The Role of the Pharmacist—Prayer and Spirituality in Healing

Cathy Creger Rosenbaum

Are you a “spiritual” pharmacist? Spirituality is defined here as an ongoing relationship with God regardless of whether one is physically healthy, “stressed out,” or sick. I encourage pharmacists to pray for and with their patients when opportunities present themselves and patients are receptive. Spiritual healing can be as dramatic as physical and emotional healing. Holistic healing encompassing all 3 components is critically important for lasting, abundant wellness for professionals and patients alike. I advocate an approach in which we as healthcare professionals reach out to others on a level beyond the routine functions involved in addressing our patients’ physical health. Spirituality promotes emotional wholeness as well as our human interrelatedness. All healthcare professionals, regardless of their belief systems, have the ability to grow in practice depth, humility, and compassion toward their patients.

What are the beneficial effects of prayer for our patients? First, regarding the acute healing process in athletes, studies have shown that faith/spirituality have positive effects on such areas as injury management and overall recovery in sports medicine.¹ Next, improved long-term health behaviors including, but not limited to, depression management and coping with serious illness have been associated with spirituality and/or religious practices.² Finally, spirituality can play a central role in the grieving process when death is imminent.³ Pharmacists and other healthcare professionals with good communication skills and a familiarity with the grief process have a unique opportunity to ask their patients if they might pray with them and listen to their concerns.

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Are you a “spiritual” pharmacist? I define being spiritual as having an ongoing relationship with God regardless of whether one is physically healthy, “stressed out,” or sick; I encourage pharmacists to pray for, and with, their patients when opportunities present themselves and patients are receptive. Spiritual healing can be as dramatic as physical and emotional healing. Holistic healing encompassing all 3 components is important for lasting, abundant wellness for professionals and patients alike.

Spiritual practice, including a reliance on prayer in the healing process, demonstrates pharmacists’ gratitude for the gifts and humility received through their relationships with patients. Imagine office-based and hospital employees, from accounting, to housekeeping, to pharmacy, to nurses and physicians, praying daily.

Many patients and their healthcare providers believe that faith-based prayers to God are important instruments for healing, and spiritual pharmacists may wish to consider integrating prayer into their professional practice.

Ann Pharmacother 2007;41:505-7.

Published Online, 6 Mar 2007, www.theannals.com, DOI 10.1345/aph.1H541

O’Hara⁴ described a role for prayer in health care, as 94% of American adults surveyed professed “a belief in God or a universal spirit,” according to a 1992 Gallup Poll. Nearly 75% of American adults pray daily, based on a study by Poloma and Pendleton.⁵ Magaletta and Duckro⁶ reported that 44% of patients studied described personal healing through prayer at least once. Prayer, a tool used for communication with God, is not simply reserved for hospital chaplains in pastoral care.

Studies of faith-based, spiritual-based, or prayer-affected outcomes, oftentimes intermixed in research, are limited by the randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind clinical trial model.^{7,8} Some believe that all 3 concepts should be well-defined, independently controlled variables in clinical research that are aligned with measurable quality-of-life outcomes.² In addition, studies should be stratified by who is doing the praying (ie, intercessors,^{7,9,10} patients/athletes,^{1,2,5,11-13} or both^{4,6}), as well as by the religious beliefs of the praying individuals (ie, Judeo-Christian,^{2,9,10} Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism^{1,3-8,11-15}). Well-designed studies

have examined the effects of spirituality in coping with different degrees of chronic physical illness, such as breast cancer and hypertension, with a focus on anger management.^{11,12,14}

There has been research that correlated mortality with spiritual practice. A meta-analysis of 42 studies involving approximately 126 000 people found that the odds of survival were 29% higher for individuals participating in spiritual activities.¹³ Control variables in this study included alcohol consumption, obesity/body mass index, health behavior, social support, and marital status. Another study found a 4% increase in longevity in a similar group.⁴ I have witnessed spiritual miracles over the past 9 years as intercessory prayers were offered for my father (through church, professional colleagues, friends, family) during chronic illnesses, including remission from multiple cancers. His healings defied logic and science.

Studies of the medical effectiveness of one type of prayer (ie, intercessory prayer offered on behalf of others) began to be conducted in the 1960s. Results have been mixed. For example, in a Harvard trial that monitored patients undergoing cardiac bypass,^{7,9,15} findings were not consistent with those of earlier studies that showed improvement of outcome through intercessory prayer.¹⁰ The Harvard researchers actually found that outcomes were worse in patients who received prayer. However, intercessors did not communicate with patients or families and did not receive much information about them. Additionally, asking patients to participate in a prayer study could have alarmed study patients and affected their outcomes.

In general, healthcare providers need to do a better job recognizing patients' needs for prayer and spirituality. However, physicians' perceptions are often not synchronized with patients' spiritual beliefs, as this aspect of healing is not commonly discussed during an office visit, hospitalization, or with the clinical pharmacist. Pharmacists may need to take the first step when dispensing prescriptions in the ambulatory care setting or participating on decentralized team rounds in hospital and long-term care facilities. Many healthcare providers believe that humans were created in God's image, that God is omnipresent, and that their God understands sickness and health and wishes health for people. Based on this belief system, where do pharmacists start? Spiritual gifts inventories may be helpful for some.^{16,17}

Consider creating a spiritual wellness journal for yourself and your patients that may be shared with other healthcare professionals. Ask those close to you about their purpose in life and how they define spirituality; compare their responses with your own personal value system. Write your own spiritual history, what has been important in your growth, and how the story evolves through sickness and health. Invite your patients to seek out physicians and other healthcare professionals who are interested in their patients' spiritual well-being as they holistically care for their

patients' needs. Ask them to pray with you, for you, and for your patients. If they seem uncomfortable praying, you can pray for them. Believe that God guides physicians in the healing process, whether this notion is articulated in their presence or not.

Lastly, take time to pray with your patients during private consultations if they appear interested. One open-ended conversation-starting combination statement/question might be: "It sounds like you are trying to cope with a lot of health issues right now. Would you mind if I prayed for you, or with you?" Take your patient's lead for next steps. Be a good listener and read between the lines of conversation regarding medication use as you develop trusting relationships with your patients over time. Remember, pharmacists have been rated by the American public to be in 1 of the 3 highest positions for honesty and ethics since 1989,¹⁸ and you can leverage that trust at a level that includes spiritual discussions. Other appropriate questions to help patients open up regarding their spiritual beliefs include, "What aspects of your spirituality would you like me to be aware of?"¹

Spiritual practice demonstrates gratitude for our gifts and humility in our relationships with our patients. The practice of spirituality can be beneficial to the entire healthcare team. Healthcare institutions with religious-based missions may offer special opportunities for pharmacists to incorporate spirituality into their professional practice. Imagine office-based and hospital employees praying daily, from those in accounting, to housekeeping, to pharmacy, to nurses and physicians. For me, these scenarios are a glimpse of heaven and represent a whole relationship with God on earth. I, and many others, believe that faith-based prayers to God are important instruments for healing. Spiritual pharmacists may wish to consider integrating prayer into their professional practices, regardless of their belief systems.

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EXTRACTO

Es usted un farmacéutico “espiritual”? Este autor define la espiritualidad y el ser espiritual como el tener una relación con Dios continua y progresiva a pesar de si uno está físicamente saludable, estresado o enfermo. Se anima a los farmacéuticos a que recen/oren por y con sus

pacientes cuando se presenten las oportunidades y los pacientes sean receptivos. La curación espiritual puede ser tan dramática como la curación física y la emocional. La curación holística abarcando todos los tres componentes es extremadamente importante para el bienestar duradero y abundante tanto para los profesionales como para los pacientes.

El ejercicio espiritual incluyendo una dependencia de la oración en el proceso curativo, demuestra la gratitud de los farmacéuticos por nuestros dones y humildad en nuestras relaciones con nuestros pacientes. Imagine a los empleados en oficinas y en hospitales orando diariamente, desde la oficina de contabilidad, los empleados de quehaceres domésticos, farmacia hasta las enfermeras, y los médicos.

Muchos pacientes y profesionales sanitarios creen que las oraciones con fe a nuestro Dios son instrumentos importantes de curación, y los farmacéuticos espirituales quizás deseen considerar el integrar la oración a sus prácticas profesionales.

Brenda R Morand

RÉSUMÉ

Êtes-vous un pharmacien “spirituel”? L’auteur définit la spiritualité et être spirituel comme ayant une relation continue avec Dieu même en présence d’une bonne santé physique, d’un stress ou d’une maladie. Les pharmaciens sont encouragés à prier pour, et avec leur patients lorsque se présentent les occasions, et lorsque les patients sont réceptifs. La guérison spirituelle peut être aussi importante que la guérison physique et émotionnelle.

La pratique spirituelle, incluant une confiance dans la prière dans le processus de guérison, dénote la gratitude des pharmaciens pour les dons et l’humilité de nos relations avec nos patients. Imaginons les employés de milieux hospitaliers et les employés de bureaux priant quotidiennement.

Beaucoup des patients et des dispensateurs de sonin croient que la foi basée sur la prière pour notre Dieu est importante pour la guérison. Les pharmaciens spirituels pourraient souhaiter intégrer la prière dans leur pratique professionnelle.

Louise Mallet