

Prayer Study: Science or Not?



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Read the following article, as a case study of the scientific method:

PRAYER HEALS, SCIENTISTS REPORT

Heart patients who had someone unknowingly praying for them suffered fewer complications, according to a study conducted by researchers in Kansas City, Mo.

William Harris, a heart researcher and the lead author of the study, said in 1999 when the results were published that it's "potentially a super- or other-than-natural mechanism," or a "natural explanation we don't understand yet."

The study by Harris and other researchers involved 990 patients admitted during a year to the Mid America Heart Institute program of St. Luke's Hospital.

Patients, randomly divided into two groups, either had someone pray for them each day by community volunteers for four weeks, or had no one assigned to pray for them.

That strangers were praying for patients in one group was not revealed to the patients, their families, or their caregivers. They were not even told they were participating in the study.

The volunteers were told to pray daily for the speedy recovery with no complications for patients. They were only given the first names of selected patients.

Patients who were prayed for suffered about 10 percent fewer complications, ranging from chest pains to cardiac arrest, after four weeks, according to the study.

The research was published Oct. 25, 1999, in the *Archives*

of Internal Medicine. The American Medical Association publishes the internal medicine journal.

Researchers concluded that prayer may be an effective addition to standard medical care. "Although we cannot know why we obtained the results we did, we can comment on what our data do not show," according to the report. "For example, we have not proven that God answers prayer or that God even exists. It was intercessory prayer, not the existence of God, that we tested here."

Harris admitted in the study that he could not control all variables. For example, at least 50 percent of the patients admitted to the hospital said they have a religious preference.

"It is probable that many, if not most, patients in both groups were already receiving intercessory and/or direct prayer from friends, family and clergy during their hospitalization," according to the report. "Thus, there was an unknowable and uncontrollable (but presumed similar) level of "background" prayer being offered for patients in both groups; whatever impact that (the) group assignment had on healing was over and above any influence background prayer may have had."

But this study and a similar one in 1988 in San Francisco that involved 393 heart patients had questionable methods, according to an expert not involved in either study.

Both studies used their own scoring systems that tallied complications. Dr. Herbert Benson, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, said their scoring systems have not been proven medically valid. Benson also is president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

In one study, prayed-for patients suffered worse and others have found no apparent benefits to being prayed for.

Benson, however, noted that people who believe in God or in prayer typically fare better than those who don't, according to medical research.

But whether prayer itself makes a difference remains unproven, according to Benson.

Questions

Based on the article, evaluate the science in the study by answering the questions below.

1. What is the hypothesis of the researchers?
2. What predictions did the researchers make?
3. What is the independent variable?
4. What is the dependent variable?
5. What are the controlled variables?
6. Describe the control group.
7. What kind of evidence was collected in the study?
8. What is the conclusion of the researchers?
9. What assumptions did the researchers make?
10. Do you think this study is an example of pseudoscience? Explain.
11. Do you think this study is an example of junk science? Explain.
12. Do you think this study is an example of antiscience? Explain.
13. What questions do you have about details of the research that were not reported in the article?
How would the answers to these questions better help you to evaluate the study?
14. What objections to this study do you think people of faith would have?

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