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## Religion a medical force

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By Jennifer Harper - A "dose of God" is good medicine for patient and physician alike, according to research released yesterday by Brandeis University and the University of Buffalo.

Doctors revealed a religious dynamic in their bedside manner: 85 percent described themselves as spiritual and 93 percent said they were raised in a religious tradition, according to the researchers. Their survey included 74 pediatric oncologists at Stanford University Medical Center, Johns Hopkins Children's Center, the Mayo Clinic and 10 other major health centers.

An additional 53 percent said religious beliefs influence their interactions with patients and peers.

"Increasingly, religion and spirituality are being recognized as important in the care of critically ill patients," said Wendy Cadge, a Brandeis sociologist who co-authored the research. "This study suggests that we should consider training to help physicians relate spiritually to families confronting life-threatening illness."

Acknowledgment of God's role in medicine is no longer clandestine.

The fact that 85 percent of doctors say religion is a positive influence in medicine was revealed earlier this year in the Archives of Internal Medicine — a journal of the American Medical Association. The University of Chicago survey of 1,144 physicians found that 54 percent also believe "at times a supernatural being intervenes" during illness. More than three-quarters said religion helps patients "cope."

Meanwhile, spiritual training for American doctors has taken flight.

"Although some professionals may feel uncomfortable obtaining information about patients' religious beliefs, it is no different than inquiring about their sexual, psychological, substance use and legal histories," said Brick Johnstone, director of the Spirituality and Health Research Project at the University of Missouri.

George Washington University's Institute for Spirituality and Health is intent on "restoring the heart and humanity of medicine," according to Dr. Christina Pulchaski, who developed the program.

Eighty percent of medical schools now incorporate some spiritual training, she said.

Along with courses in community medicine and clinical problems, the University of Nevada School of Medicine offers "Spirituality in Medicine," while Stanford's School of Medicine features "Spirituality and Meaning in Medicine." This fall, the University of Buffalo's medical school inaugurated a comprehensive four-year medical-spirituality curriculum.

"Many patients have spiritual beliefs that affect their health and well-being," said Dr. David Holmes, an adviser, who also pointed out that 90 percent of Americans believe in God, according to Gallup.

"Spiritual practices" are associated with shorter hospital stays, less depression and substance abuse, lower blood pressure and a greater sense of well-being, Dr. Holmes said. He also noted the American Association of Medical Colleges and the Joint Commission of Accreditation of Health Care Organizations both support spiritual training for physicians.

Patients have clamored for such things for years. A 2003 survey of 920 adults by Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine found that 83 percent wanted to discuss their spiritual beliefs with their doctor.

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