

MUSLIM PATIENTS PERCEPTIONS OF FAITH-BASED HEALING AND RELIGIOUS INCLINATION OF TREATING PHYSICIANS

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ABSTRACT

Background:

While there has been a recent resurgence in faith-based healing across the world, there is limited data from the Muslim societies. In addition, the impact of the religious inclination of treating physicians on patient's perception of their treatment is not known. We sought to study this aspect of faith-based healing.

Methods:

This survey was carried out in Jan 2007 at two leading high volume public hospitals in Islamabad. A formatted 12 questions form was filled for each patient. For each question, there were three answer choices: “yes, no or don't know.” The patients were admitted in the inpatient departments, including those in the intensive care unit if they were physically and mentally capable of answering the questions.

Results:

A total of 604 patients completed the survey. 91.2% were male and 8.8% were female. 8.9% were < 20 years of age, 56.5% were between 21-40 and 34.6% were > 40 years of age. 99.7% believed that leading an Islamic way of life (abstaining from forbidden things e.g. fornication, alcohol, cigarettes, illicit drugs etc.) leads to a healthier life. 95% of the patients believed that praying five daily prayers (*salat*) will keep them healthy. 98% believed that listening to the holy Qur'an would help in their healing. 98.8% believed in the intercessory role of prayers by others. 82% believed that giving charity (*sadaqa*) assists in healing. The most important findings were that 93% wanted to see their physicians pray for their health out-loud in front of them and 88% believed that having a physician, who is also a God-fearing person, will have a positive impact on their health. In view of the current social/cultural practices, 76% believed that wearing *emulets* (religious inscriptions) also helps in healing.

Conclusions:

This survey clearly shows that the overwhelming majority of patients still equated an “Islamic way of life” with good health. The most important finding documented for the first time, in this survey, was that patients wanted their physicians to pay due reverence to prayer (Dua). Similarly for most patients, religious inclination of the physician was perceived as an essential factor in the overall effectiveness of treatment.

Key Words: Faith-based healing Religion Islam Modern Medicin.

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INTRODUCTION

It appears that in the last century, modern medicine has purposefully shied away from the role of seemingly intangible and extremely variable factors like religion and spirituality in healing. Technologically advanced modalities just seemed too incompatible with traditional faith-based healing which has been an integral part of all divine faiths. This transformation, though global, affected the Western societies the most. Predominantly Muslim

countries, particularly those of the Sub-Continent i.e. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh etc. have witnessed this change in focus to a lesser extent, presumably as a result of religious and cultural factors.^{1,2}

However the last decade has seen some major shift in attitudes towards faith-based healing. Increasingly, researchers are finding that patients do find solace in religion and spirituality despite being in the most technologically advanced health care system.³⁻⁵ A TIME-magazine survey in 1996 of 1004 Americans showed that 82 % believed in the healing power of prayer and 64 % thought that doctors should pray for their patients who request it.⁶ Physicians are now finding out that there may be more to good medicine than just well trained doctors and technology. Indeed, an increasing number of schools in the US are now adding alternative and holistic medicine courses to their curriculum.⁷ Not surprisingly, most of the data regarding faith-based healing comes from the West and not from Muslim countries which have a deep rooted tradition in religion's impact on health and disease based on Qur'anic injunctions and authentic Ahadeeth (sayings) of the Prophet of Islam.

We sought to study not only the impact of faith on healing for patients but in addition, whether the physician's religious stature and conviction affected the perception of patients regarding their treatment's success or failure.

Methods:

We conducted a survey of 605 patients admitted in the inpatient department of two large tertiary care referral hospitals in the capital city Islamabad. Patients were admitted to various specialties including those in the intensive care units as long as they were able to answer the questions. These hospitals cater to patients from the mid to the entire northern part of the country and hence can be assumed to be a fair representation of the national population.

A formatted questionnaire was developed in national language. Staff members, who were given clear instructions, completed the survey from patients who were able to understand the questions and give answers. Since there was no similar standardized

form available, the questions were pilot tested in 10 staff members and validated. Patients were excluded if they did not consent to the survey. Due to cultural reasons, obstetrical and gynecological patients were excluded.

Data entry and analysis was done using SPSS version 10.0. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency (percentage) for the various responses have been reported.

Results:

A total of 605 patients completed the survey. The patients were admitted to different inpatient wards of two large volume hospitals. The overwhelming majority was male and more than two-thirds were less than 40 years of age. Table-1 lists all the questions that were asked (translated into English for publication purposes) and the response to those questions.

99.7% of patients believed that living a life compatible with traditional Islamic teachings i.e. abstaining from fornication, alcohol, gambling, bribery and other social evils, leads to better health. 95.4% also believed that praying the five daily obligatory prayers (salat) also leads to a healthier life. The survey reaffirmed a rather overlooked aspect of faith and health in this age of modern medicine i.e. 98.3% of patients believed that listening to the recitation of the holy Quran helps in healing. The most provocative questions of the survey revealed the most important findings: 93.4% of patients wanted their treating physicians to pray for them out-loud during their visits and even more surprisingly 88% believed that having a physician who is also a faithful practicing Muslim would have a positive impact on the outcome of their disease. In line with the cultural practices of the sub-continent 76.6% of patients believed that wearing *emulets* with religious inscriptions can have a beneficial effect on their illness.

Discussion:

Modern medicine has seen unprecedented progress over the last century. Diseases previously thought to be incurable are now managed with ease. But this

rapid pace of medical technological innovations has come at the price of automatization of care. Success and failure are measured only in concrete scientific terms i.e. End points and not necessarily by a spiritual sense of contentment or well being. Granted that religion and its impact on health is a complex process which has likely added to this growing divide. In addition, as the average life span increases, the proportion of patients with chronic diseases like cancer, depression etc also increases.⁸ Managing these chronic illnesses requires a holistic approach in which faith and life style play a major role.

This divide between two essential elements of the same process has now been recognized and increasingly physicians are attempting to understand the dimensions of faith and its effects on health and illness and that it can be, and is, a synergistic factor to modern allopathic medicine.^{6,9}

Islam carries a unique concept of health and sickness with some very clear messages in the Qur'an and the *Ahadeeth* (sayings) of prophet Muhammad (PBUH). For instance, the Qur'an states that "We sent down of the Qur'an that which is a healing and mercy to those who believe. Chapter 17, verse 82" as well as "when I get sick, it is my Lord Who Heals me. Chapter 26, verse 80." These verses of the Qur'an clearly establish a fundamental role of faith in addition to healing, for the Muslims.

The Prophet (PBUH) affirmed that in Fateha (chapter 2 of the Qur'an) there is shifa (healing) for people.ⁱ According to authentic reports, the Prophet himself used and recommended the use of various verses of the Qur'an as well as other invocation for help in diseaseⁱⁱ in addition to using the medical tools of that time.

There is an increasing recognition of the fact that Muslim patient's perceptions and responses to illness are deeply affected as a result of the unique nature of their faith in Allah (God) and this has been recognized by physicians and nurses who are involved in taking care of Muslim patients.

Praying five daily prayers is a fundamental pillar of Islam. We did not ask the patients whether they observed this obligation themselves. But even if that was not the case for many, their answer affirmed their

inherent belief about the positive effect of obligatory prayers on one's general well being. As it is a common tradition in Islam, most patients believed in asking others, particularly relatives to pray for them during their sickness. This belief is based on sound narrations attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) where the prayer of a Muslim for his faith brother in absentia is answered by Allah (God).ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that 98.3% believed that listening to the holy Qur'an could help in healing, stands in contrast to the treatment strategy in practice all over the Muslim countries, where such features are not considered standard adjunct to treatment. While this study strongly supports the role of faith in healing and well being for most Muslim patients, it documents for the first time, how the religious inclination of the treating physicians effects the patient's perception of the outcome of their treatment. It also challenges the long standing misconception even in Muslim societies that patients do not want their physicians to pray for them and that too, out-loud.

These findings have important implications for optimizing the care of complex diseases in today's technology driven medical care particularly in the Muslim world. As increasing number of hospitals in the United States are incorporating faith-based healing into modern medicine, hospitals and physicians in Muslim countries need to wake up to this reality as well. It is highly likely that Muslim patients because of their unique belief system are ideally suited for such a holistic approach to disease and health.

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Table 1: Responses to various questions in the survey (n=604)

QUESTIONS		Response	
		#	%
1. Do you believe that when we fall sick, it is Allah who Heals us?	Yes	603	99.8
	No	0	0
	Don't Know	1	0.2
2. Do you agree that by leading an Islamic way of life, you can be healthier?	Yes	602	99.7
	No	2	0.3
	Don't Know	0	0
3. Do you agree that those who are regular in daily <i>salat</i> (namaz), their health is better than those who do not?	Yes	576	95.4
	No	15	2.5
	Don't Know	13	2.1
4. Do you believe that Allah can cure even when doctors have given up hope?	Yes	604	100
5. When sick, do you specifically pray to Allah to heal you?	Yes	553	91.6
	No	1	0.2
	Sometimes	50	8.2
6. Should we request others to pray for us, when we are sick?	Yes	597	98.8
	No	2	0.3
	Don't know	5	0.9
7. Should doctors pray for their patients in front of them?	Yes	564	93.4
	No	18	3.0
	Don't know	22	3.6
8. Do you think that if your doctor is a good, God-fearing Muslim, it will have a positive impact on your illness?	Yes	532	88.1
	No	48	7.9
	Don't know	24	4.0
9. Do you believe that listening to the Holy Quran will help in your healing?	Yes	594	98.3
	No	3	0.5
	Don't know	7	1.2
10. Do you believe that giving sadaqa (charity) will help in you healing?	Yes	501	82.9
	No	102	16.9
	Don't Know	1	0.2
11. Do you believe that wearing of written aya's of the Holy Quran helps in healing?	Yes	463	76.7
	No	76	12.5
	Don't know	65	10.8