

# H · e · a · l · t · h

## Faith 'proves' to have strong effect on health

By Kathleen Schwar  
Staff writer

Observant Catholics inherently should be leading a healthy lifestyle, according to Paulist Father Mark-David Janus of the Ohio State University College of Medicine.

That's because of such reasons as the respect for life the church fosters, its message against premarital sex (which if followed would reduce the risk of sexually-transmitted disease), its cultivation of community, and its emphasis on prayer, he explained.

Also, he noted, when religious and lay ministers visit the sick, "We know that makes an enormous difference in the recovery of people."

Medical students need to know about the various religious and spiritual traditions their patients observe, the assistant professor of psychiatry said.

To help fill that need at Ohio State, last year Father Janus and a chaplain began co-teaching a required course, "Faith in Medicine."

"We're focusing on first-year medical students before they get into any bad habits about thinking this isn't important," the former Rochesterian said in a telephone interview from Columbus.

The course presents hard-core research into the positive effects of faith, information about religious teachings that can affect medical choices, and lessons in speaking the spiritual language of one's patient.

The course was funded with one of the first John Templeton Foundation grants for such efforts, which are still not common at medical schools.

Father Janus, who grew up in Greece's St. Lawrence Parish and graduated from St. John Fisher College, also co-wrote the course. In the process, he found

resources. "There is more scientific literature that has been growing on this, and people need to be aware of this," he said of faith's



Photo illustration by Matthew Scott/Staff Photographer

effects on health. "Again, this is a medical school. So if you are doing something there has got to be some serious science behind it.

"It isn't just because I'm a

priest and I think it's a good idea. ... Well, scientifically it's a good idea."

The studies show, he said, "It isn't really a matter in some respects that someone is religious,

it matters *how* they are religious.

"What matters in someone's spirituality is how meaningful it is to them and what is their relationship with God, with their church and with their faith com-

munity."

Some of the research he studied was done by Dr. Dale A. Matthews of Georgetown University. Matthews, a popular speaker, lectured at the Chautauqua Institution the week of July 7-13 on research he said that shows people of faith are healthier than people not of faith. He did a follow-up appearance on CNN.

He noted studies that have shown, for example, that hospitalized heart patients did better when prayed for. And a 1995 Dartmouth Medical School study showed death rates, six months after coronary artery bypass grafting (open-heart surgery), of 5 percent for church-goers and 0 percent for "deeply religious" people, in contrast to 9 percent for others.

"The Bible says God heals all who seek him," Matthews said. "It seems reasonable."

Yet only when medical literature appears to back this up does that likelihood seem to carry more weight for many people, he added.

He did acknowledge a need for more studies.

"You've got to go further," he said. Scientific protocol requires repeatability, he noted, and that would mean "you take a group that is unhealthy and does not have faith, inject them with faith, however you do that, and see if their health improves."

But Matthews himself is so convinced of the healing effects of faith that he almost routinely asks patients if they'd like him to pray with them.

"Patients often said, 'Doctor, would you pray for me?'" he recalled. "I heard that a lot. And I tried to push that off, or would pray for them on Sunday.

"But now I say, 'Sure, let's pray right now.'"

At first he was anxious about praying with a patient, and "I'd kind of mumble something over my shoulder."

But praying became comfortable, he said, with practice.

"Patients will sometimes weep when that happens," he said.

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