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Healing

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2000. Written by a group of biomedical researchers and health-care chaplains, the article suggested that any evidence or studies supporting the idea that religious activities promote health are unconvincing.

"However valuable praying, reading the Bible, and watching religious television programs may be for a religious life, there is insufficient evidence linking these activities to health," the authors noted.

The article sparked a slew of rebuttals, including a letter to the editor on Nov. 2, 2000, from Dr. Anthony Suchman of Rochester, who practices primary care and internal medicine at Highland Hospital.

In his letter to the editor, he pointed out that the authors seem to be contradicting themselves: On one hand, they said that physicians are not qualified to talk to patients about religion and spirituality, yet the article pointed out that nearly 30 U.S. medical schools offer courses on religion, spirituality and health. Suchman also found fault with the "religious activities" focus of the article's title as opposed to a focus on spiritual experiences in general. The focus on religious activities specifically, he wrote, "forces differences in doctrine to the foreground and obscures the possibility of a more appropriate and respectful generic approach."

"I don't buy into this mind/body separation," Suchman said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "I think you have to look at the whole life."

Treating the whole person

Early in his career, Suchman decided that spirituality can — and should — play a role in helping a patient heal.

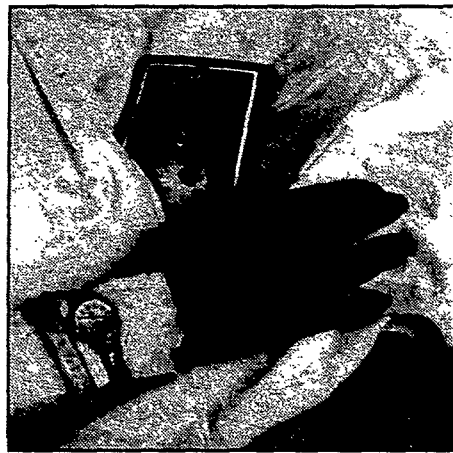
For 20 years, he has been on the University of Rochester faculty, where he conducted research into patient-clinician relationships. He became fascinated by the stories of his patients, and noticed that the simple act of listening meant a great deal to them.

He recalled in his paper "Towards a Spiritual Model for Medical Care," which is yet unpublished, that he learned to briefly refrain from pursuing his medical agenda to give his patients the opportunity to move more deeply into their stories.

In doing so, "I began to experience moments of profound rapport in which the patient and I seemed briefly and beautifully joined. There was a peaceful, loving and mutually healing quality to these moments," he wrote.

Now it is common practice for Suchman to ask his patients' questions that often lead to a discussion of spirituality and religion.

Suchman is very careful to respect his patients, realizing that everyone he treats comes from a different religious and spiritual background. Suchman is Jewish, and says that he has no right to impose his religious or spiritual views on others. But he sees no problem broaching the subject of



A resident at Hill Haven nursing home in Penfield holds a holy card during a March 7 Mass celebrated by Father Frederick Helfrich.

spirituality with his patients in a generic way.

He remembers one patient who came to him for help with anxiety symptoms. Suchman said it would have been easy to just give him a prescription, but he realized the symptoms meant something.

So he asked his patient a question: If your symptom were a voice, what would it be saying to you right now?

His patient looked startled, and thought for a moment. He said the voice would tell him about all the things missing in his life, such as spending too much time at work and not with his family.

"And the anxiety symptoms went away," Suchman said.

Sometimes his questions lead to a deeper discussion of spirituality and religion. Whatever patients do as part of their belief systems — if they find comfort in prayer or going to church — he invites them to do those things.

"I think there is such a thing as 'soul sickness,'" Suchman said. "I find it important to talk to people about their spiritual health. I feel like that's a part of my job."

Talking to God

In late January and early February, Marianne Blanda-Holtzberg's job was to pray for her husband, Richard, to beat the invasive strep infection that threatened his life. Heavily sedated and unable to pray for himself, Richard wasn't even aware he was fighting for his life.

Marianne spent countless hours at Richard's side, holding his hand and praying.

She wasn't the only one.

Literally thousands of people prayed for Richard, from family and friends to people involved in international prayer networks. Marianne's brother lives in Ireland, and his parish there prayed for Richard's recovery. Even strangers who saw Marianne in the hospital's waiting room told her they were praying for her husband, and she, likewise, prayed for their loved ones.

"It was overwhelming," she said.

Marianne remembers her sister's visit to Richard's hospital room, where she said the

rosary at his bedside. As her sister prayed, the rosary broke, so she placed the crucifix in his hands. Later that day, Marianne and Richard's daughters, who are Jewish like their father, came into the room and noticed the crucifix. They were concerned that their father might not approve if he were aware that he was holding it.

Marianne replied that Richard would be happy to hold the crucifix if it made his sister-in-law happy. Besides, Marianne added, she wasn't about to remove it. Since it had been placed in his hands, his kidneys, which had been shutting down, began to improve.

Nearly three weeks after being admitted to the Strong with only a 10 to 20 percent chance of survival, Richard Holtzberg bounced back. His kidneys began to function properly, he beat the strep infection and his arm was saved.

"The doctor told me it was a miracle," Marianne Blanda-Holtzberg said.

And she is convinced that prayer played a big role in her husband's recovery.

The power of prayer

Dr. Marguerite Dynski agrees about the power of prayer. She has seen what prayer can do for people on many different levels — as a Rochester General Hospital physician specializing in breast disease and cancer, as a Sister of St. Joseph and as a patient recently diagnosed with breast cancer.

Sister Dynski cites what she considers a convincing study published in the *Journal of Internal Medicine* in the late 1990s regarding the power of prayer. More than 200 intensive-care-unit patients were put into two groups: one of the groups was prayed for by members of a prayer network, and the other group was not prayed for. Sister Dynski said the study showed that those who were prayed for healed faster.

"It's very clear to me that those who are connected to others through prayer do better," she said.

She remembers one of her younger patients who was diagnosed with breast cancer and was distraught at the diagnosis. To calm her down, Sister Dynski asked the patient if she was part of a worshipping community and, learning she was Catholic, offered to pray with the woman and her husband during an office visit.

"It really helped a lot," Sister Dynski said.

Prayer is something Sister Dynski relied on eight years ago when she had back surgery to fuse several of her vertebrae. She woke up paralyzed after the operation, realizing a fear that, in part, had made her put off the surgery for 17 years.

At times, it was hard just to breathe, she said. But when things looked their bleakest, she remembered that there were things in life over which she could not exert control. At these times, she would recite a short prayer, "Let me be willing to be willing." She said this prayer opened her to the will of God and helped her accept whatever plans he had for her, whether she understood them or not. After several months of rehabilitation, she was able to walk again.

Although Northern Ireland still suffers from occasional sectarian violence, Hume

Now Sister Dynski is again experiencing first hand the power of prayer. After an annual mammogram in February, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Since that time, she has had three surgeries and is now receiving chemotherapy. Her medical training enables her to understand what is happening to her and what is to come, she said, but she is getting through the ordeal through her faith in God and her willingness to let his will be done.

"I also know there are lots of people praying for me," she added. "I've felt the power of prayer."

The miracle man

Richard Holtzberg, too, has felt prayer's power. After being prayed for by family, friends and complete strangers, he emerged from three weeks of sedation at Strong Memorial Hospital just a few days before Valentine's Day. He began to improve steadily, and about a week afterward, realized how close to death he had come. His doctor said he would not be alive today if he had delayed coming to the emergency room by just a couple of hours.

"I really started to feel scared," Holtzberg said upon hearing that news. "It was an ordeal."

And along with excellent medical care at Strong, he believes prayer is what helped him pull through.

"I had to believe prayer had an effect on getting me through," said Holtzberg, who is an attorney in East Rochester. "There isn't a card (I received) that didn't say 'I prayed for you.' I must have had thousands of people praying for me."

Holtzberg believes so strongly that prayer helped him survive that he wanted to do something special for his wife and daughters on Valentine's Day. Although he had just come out of heavy sedation and did not have the use of his right arm, he called one of his clients, a Rochester jeweler. He ordered seven heart-shaped necklaces in gold with diamonds and had them engraved with the date Jan. 23. He gave them to his wife and daughters for Valentine's Day presents.

"That's the date they got me back," Holtzberg said.

Holtzberg is now recovering at home. During his hospital stay he had two surgeries on his arm, including a skin graft taken from his thigh to replace the portions of his arm that were infected with the strep infection and removed. His arm is healing, and he is expected to make a full recovery.

Holtzberg said the experience changed his life in a number of ways.

"I never had time for the important things I needed to do," he said, noting that he was always working. "I'm really trying to change my life."

And part of that change is spending a little more time on his religious life. Before, he said, he never gave much credence to prayer. That has changed.

"There were a lot of factors at work here," Holtzberg said of his recovery. "I believe prayer was a large one."

Hume

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Today, Northern Ireland is a vastly different place than it was even a decade ago, he said, as he outlined his role and that of others in the Irish peace process. Northern Ireland was wracked by warfare between nationalist paramilitaries, unionist paramilitaries and British Army and police forces from 1969 through the mid-1990s. As leader of his party, which represents 60 percent of the nationalist vote, Hume was instrumental in persuading Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, the province's other mainly Catholic party, to convince the Provisional Irish Republican Army to end its war. The PIRA, which is closely allied with Sinn Fein, had been waging guerrilla warfare against the British Army and Northern Ireland's security forces since the early 1970s. The war claimed the lives of one out of 500 Northern Irish citizens. The PIRA's decision to end its war led to a ceasefire by all sides. The parties then began to

negotiate what has come to be known as the Good Friday Agreement, a power-sharing compromise still in effect today.

Hume said the trick to getting the republicans to lay down their guns was convincing them that the British presence in Northern Ireland was not the main problem in reunifying the region with the republic — it was the deep-seated division between nationalists and unionists. He added that both communities in Northern Ireland quarreled for too long over territory instead of fundamental civil rights.

"Territories don't have rights, people have rights," he said. "When people are divided, the only solution is agreement and the only way to that solution is dialogue."

Hume credited several U.S. leaders for encouraging the peace process, included former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Carter urged Britain and Ireland to talk about Northern Ireland way back in the 1970s when no one else would have dreamed of such a thing happening, Hume said.

Then Clinton and his envoy, George

Mitchell, spent years nurturing the often tense negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. The agreement was approved in a 1998 referendum by the majority of the people of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

The deal created an assembly of representatives that proportionally represents Northern Ireland's citizenry. It also created various areas of shared responsibility between the two communities.

The agreement also allows for a majority of Northern Ireland's citizens to reunify with the republic or remain British through possible future referendums without any interference from either the British or Irish governments. On that note, Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Hume, recently suggested that a poll be taken of voters on the issue of Northern Ireland's border during next year's assembly elections. The Ulster Unionist Party is Northern Ireland's largest Protestant party.

Although Northern Ireland still suffers from occasional sectarian violence, Hume

said the agreement has remarkably changed life there. British troops, once ubiquitous in the province, are mostly gone from the streets. Meanwhile, he said, 2,000 Catholics have applied for jobs in the security forces. In the past, Catholics generally eschewed working for the police who were seen as enforcers of British rule.

Even in the darkest days of his career, when hope seemed lost, Hume said he was always encouraged to continue his work by the families of the victims of violence.

While attending the funeral of a man killed in a pub bombing, for example, he was approached by the man's daughter who said: "We prayed for you around our daddy's coffin for success in your (talks with Gerry Adams) so that others won't have to go through what we went through."

Such young people continue to give him hope that Northern Ireland's peace process will continue to succeed, he said.

"The quarrel is hopelessly out-of-date," he said, "and I think the new generation is realizing that as well."