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Study finds proximity could be key to success of healing prayer

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- Findings reported today (Aug. 5) from a new international study of healing prayer suggest that prayer for another person's healing just might help -- especially if the one praying is physically near the person being prayed for.

Candy Gunther Brown, an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University Bloomington, led the study of "proximal intercessory prayer" for healing. It is available online today and will be published in the September 2010 issue of the *Southern Medical Journal*.

The study, titled "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer (STEPP) on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Rural Mozambique," measured surprising improvements in vision and hearing in economically disadvantaged areas where eyeglasses and hearing aids are not readily available.

An advance copy of the study is available prior to online publication from Bridget Garland at smjedit@etsu.edu.

"We chose to investigate 'proximal' prayer because that is how a lot of prayer for healing is actually practiced by Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians around the world," Brown said. "These constitute the fastest-growing Christian subgroups globally, with some 500 million adherents, and they are among those most likely to pray expectantly for healing."

Brown and her colleagues carried out the study as part of a larger research program, funded by the John Templeton Foundation Flame of Love Project, on the cultural significance and experience of spiritual healing practices. As editor of a forthcoming book on Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing (Oxford University Press, scheduled for release January 2011), Brown has made an in-depth, seven-year study of how pentecostals worldwide pray for healing.

Although pentecostals often pray for their own healing and request distant intercessory prayer, they consider proximal prayer to be particularly efficacious and emphasize the importance of physical proximity and human touch in praying effectively for healing.

"When people feel that they have a serious need for healing, they are willing to try almost anything," Brown said. "If they feel that a particular religious or spiritual practice healed them, they are much more likely to become an adherent. This phenomenon, more than any other, accounts for the growth of these Christian subgroups globally."

Brown and her colleagues studied the activities of the healing groups Iris Ministries and Global Awakening in Mozambique and Brazil because of their reputation as hotspots of specialized prayer for those with hearing and vision impairments. The researchers used an audiometer and vision charts to evaluate 14 rural Mozambican subjects who reported impaired hearing and 11 who reported impaired vision, both before and after the subjects received proximal intercessory prayer (PIP). The study focused on hearing and vision because it is possible to measure them with hearing machines and vision charts, allowing a more direct measure of improvement than simply asking people whether they feel better.

Subjects exhibited improved hearing and vision that was statistically significant after PIP was administered. Two subjects with impaired hearing reduced the threshold at which they could detect sound by 50 decibels. Three subjects had their tested vision improve from 20/400 or worse to 20/80 or better. These improvements are much larger than those typically found in suggestion and hypnosis studies.

Brown recounted that one subject, an elderly Mozambican woman named Maryam, initially reported that she could not see a person's hand, with two upraised fingers, from a distance of one foot. A healing practitioner put her hand on Maryam's eyes, hugged her and prayed for less than a minute; then the person held five fingers in front of Maryam, who was able to count them and even read the 20/125 line on a vision chart.

The study focuses on clinical effects of PIP and does not attempt to explain the mechanisms by which the improvements occurred.

Supplemental digital content for the published study reports on a follow-up study with similar findings conducted by the same researchers in urban Brazil. Co-authors include physicians Stephen C. Mory of Nashville, Tenn., and Rebecca Williams of Johannesburg, South Africa, and Michael J. McClymond, associate professor of theological studies at Saint Louis University.

Scientific research on intercessory prayer has in recent decades generated a firestorm of controversy, with critics charging that attempts to study the efficacy of prayer are inherently unscientific and should be abandoned because the mechanisms are poorly understood. Several studies have produced contradictory findings.

The title of the current study makes reference to the widely discussed 2006 "STEP" (study of the therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer) paper, which concluded that prayer itself had no effect, but certainty of receiving prayer adversely affected health. However, the STEP study, like most previous research on the efficacy of prayer, focused on distant intercessory prayer (DIP) rather than proximal prayer. It also included only one group of Protestant intercessors: Silent Unity, a "New Thought" group whose leaders have explicitly rejected prayers of supplication or petition as "useless."

"If empirical research continues to indicate that PIP may be therapeutically beneficial, then -- whether or not the mechanisms are adequately understood -- there are ethical and nonpartisan public policy reasons to encourage further related research," Brown said. "It is a primary privilege and responsibility of medical science to pursue a better understanding of therapeutic inventions that may advance global health, especially in contexts where conventional medical treatments are inadequate or unavailable."

Dr. John Peteet, a professor at Harvard Medical School, similarly commented in an editorial in the current issue of the *Southern Medical Journal*: "Whatever their views about the efficacy of healing prayer and about whether it belongs in the armamentarium of medicine, clinicians and believers share core commitments to healing whenever it is possible, and to meaningful acceptance when it is not."

The World Health Organization estimates that 278 million people, 80 percent of whom live in developing countries, have moderate to profound hearing loss in both ears; and 314 million people, 87 percent of whom live in developing countries, are visually impaired. Only a tiny fraction of these populations currently receive any treatment.

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The study will be available online Aug. 5 at <http://journals.lww.com/smajournalonline/toc/publishahead>. In September, an interview with Brown will be available on the *Southern Medical Journal* website.

To speak to Brown, please contact Steve Hinnefeld at the IU Office of University Communications, 812-856-3488 or slhinnef@indiana.edu.

"Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer (STEPP) on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Rural Mozambique." *Southern Medical Journal*, September 2010, Volume 103, Issue 9

About the *Southern Medical Journal*

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