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Medicine and spirituality

The Boston Globe



Brandeis sociologist Wendy Cadge's book, "Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine," will explore how spirituality's influence is often felt but rarely acknowledged in hospitals. (Wendy Maeda/ Globe Staff)

By Kay Lazar
Globe Staff / November 30, 2009

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Wendy Cadge is fascinated by the intersection of religion and medicine. The 33-year-old Brandeis University sociologist has spent years walking the halls of hospitals, interviewing physicians, nurses, and chaplains, and analyzing the offerings, often written on scraps of paper, that people tuck into hospital prayer books - she calls them snippets of the intimate conversations people have with God. Cadge's latest work examines how physicians who treat children view religion and spirituality, and she uncovered distinctly different opinions, depending on whether the doctors' patients were healthy or facing death. Cadge found that pediatricians with healthy patients tend to regard religion mostly as a barrier because a family's beliefs can conflict with medical decision-making. But specialists who treat children with cancer told her that religion can be a bridge, helping families cope with a very sick or dying child. Now Cadge is finishing a book, "Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine," that explores the ways in which religion's influence is often felt but rarely acknowledged in hospitals. **KAY LAZAR**

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Q. How did you become interested in studying religion?

A. I didn't know anything about the academic world when I went to college and I wanted to think big thoughts. At registration, I went to the table to sign up for a course, an intro to philosophy, and it was full. But religion was next door, and I thought,

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that's all the same thing. The course was fabulous. It seemed like a window through which I could better understand the world, and it helped me better understand what makes some people tick.

Q. Your latest work found that even physicians who believe religion is helpful for their patients are hesitant to bring up the topic. Why is that?

A. They don't have any formal training or background in asking these types of questions. I don't think in the US we talk very much, or very seriously, with people who might have different religious backgrounds than we do. I think people are afraid of offending someone.

Q. Do you pray?

A. No, I don't. I try not to identify with a religion and I don't consider myself especially religious. I grew up going to a liberal Methodist church and it was an important part of my life. I am not regularly involved now with a religious group, but I am in a hand-bell choir at Old South Church in Boston, a big liberal United Church of Christ congregation.

Q. What is the most memorable message you've found tucked inside a hospital prayer book?

A. It was a series of prayers written by a child, I would guess she was 7 or 8 from her handwriting. It was at the Johns Hopkins University Hospital and it seemed like she and her mother had come from out of town to be with her grandfather who was in the hospital. The first few were her asking God to watch over her grandfather in surgery. The next were asking God to watch over him afterward. Then it seemed like she was asking God to watch over him as she and her mother were going home. It was a kind of a conversation between her and her mother and God. Most of the prayers are written like letters or e-mails to God. ■

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