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HEALTH ANSWERS

What do prayer books written in hospital chapels reveal about us?

By Judy Foreman | January 26, 2009

In what is believed to be the first systematic review of hospital prayer books, Brandeis University sociologist Wendy Cadge and a colleague analyzed the heartfelt offerings of people whose loved ones are ill. The analysis of 683 prayers - written by 536 people at Johns Hopkins University Hospital between 1999 and 2005 - showed that writers were searching for strength, not miracles.

The prayers primarily offer thanks to God, and ask for courage and the ability to cope, not for specific medical outcomes.

The finding contrasts with earlier research showing that two-thirds of Americans believe that God can cure illnesses that science deems incurable, said Cadge.

The people who recorded their prayers appear to view God not as an authoritarian, gruff figure who could tell them what to do, but as an accessible, wise friend.

One child wrote, "Dear God, Please let this be P's last thing he has to go through. And let the journey down his long road of recovery start today." An adult wrote, "Dear Jesus, please heal G. Heal his little heart so he will be able to come home soon." (For privacy reasons, the names of the loved ones were reported as initials.)

Anger rarely showed up in people's prayers, though frustration did creep in occasionally, as in the prayer that asked: "Keep an eye on the pediatric neurologist resident or fellow that fouled up. Make sure he don't hurt anyone."

Analyzing people's prayers "gives us a glimpse of how people conceive God," says Cadge. The prayers, she feels, "are snippets of an ongoing conversation" with God.

George Fitchett, an epidemiologist and hospital chaplain at Rush University Medical Center, who studies how people use prayers in medical settings, agrees with Cadge's finding that people "have a sense of God as someone who is listening, caring." Basically, he says, people seem to pray to God not for miracles but "to help them cope."

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