

Physicians in the ecosystem of religion and faith

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ABSTRACT

Faith and religion for centuries have been part of the socio-cultural habits of populations. Africans in particular are much anchored in their cultures and beliefs which considerably influence their experience. Medicine is a sector which is not spared from the influence of religion or spirituality. Studies to date have shown the positive effect that spirituality has on mortality and on the quality of life of patients. The doctor who orchestrates the physical, mental and also social health of the patient must be able to integrate and take into consideration the cultural and spiritual complexities specific to each patient without, compromising his scientific approach.

Keywords: religion, physicians, faith, spirituality.

Essay

Medicine in its early days was steeped in rituals that invoked the intervention of supernatural powers, as man was unable to treat illnesses and struggled to endure the suffering caused by them and the fragility of their bodies [1]. Also, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not consisting only of the absence of disease

or infirmity [2]. However, the doctor who sees a patient must take into account and take care of the social aspect of the patient, a social aspect which includes religion [3]. Nowadays several studies have shown the importance of faith or spirituality in improving the state of health and in the survival of patients [4, 5, 6]. This should alert practitioners to be informed and more opened to the cultural and spiritual considerations of each patient. Spirituality occupies an important place in African culture, which makes it almost essential in the psycho social care of patients. The National Cancer Institute defines religion as a collection of beliefs and practices associated with a religion or denomination [7]. In Hebrews 11: 1 Faith is defined as “a firm assurance of things which are hoped for, a demonstration of these which are not seen.” This definition of faith helps to understand the results of an American study on the influence of spiritual beliefs and practices on the treatment preferences of African Americans. They found that, recurring themes describing spiritual beliefs influencing the treatment preferences of African Americans throughout the disease included: spiritual beliefs and practices. These were a source of comfort, adaptation and support and the most effective way to influence healing: God is responsible for physical and spiritual health; and

the physician is the instrument of God [8]. However, for some African Americans, spiritual beliefs are important in understanding and coping with illness and can provide a framework in which treatment decisions are made [8]. There is growing scientific evidence for a positive association between religious involvement, and multiple health indicators. There are strong evidences existing for the association between religious attendance and mortality, with higher attendance levels predicting a strong, consistent, and often gradual reduction in the risk of mortality [9]. Negative health effects of religion have also been documented for some aspects of religious beliefs and behavior and under certain conditions. Health practices and social ties are important avenues through which religion can affect health [9].

The role of the physician in this whole process is not the least. Without denigrating it, without showing his disinterest, without taking the place of a spiritual guide either, the doctor must show the patient that his religious conviction or his faith is a plus in his care. Thus, the study carried out in the United States, "Religiousness and spiritual support among advanced cancer patients and associations with end-of-life treatment preferences and quality of life" showed that 47% of patients said their spiritual needs were little or not taken at all by a religious community, and 72% said their spiritual needs were little or not taken care of by the medical system. Spiritual support from religious communities or the medical system was significantly associated with patients' quality of life ($P=0.0003$) [4]. Today there are some theoretical perspectives from psychology supportive of a healing effect of faith. Also, theory, and research on psychoneuroimmunology and placebos demonstrate that modern psychology can accommodate a healing power of faith [10].

Some understanding of the complexities of different cultures, and spiritualities is essential for healthcare providers. Thus, an emphasis during medical training on the role of the spirituality of patients during their care must be made.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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