

“... 81% of all studies showed religion benefits health. With only 4% showing harm, religion leads to greater happiness, morale, optimism, and meaning in life.”

Religion benefits health

In November 2011, I finally gave in to my bowels. Frequency and slime were one thing, but bleeding was the game changer. A delay of 6 months cost me a lymph node, allowing my rectum to enjoy a second course of chemotherapy. The offending mass had already been removed and fried and a year later, cancer over and my white count recovering, I was back at work. Just another patient benefiting from standard treatment. Or is there more to the story?

Reflecting on my brush with mortality, I could concentrate on the details: how my wife and I agonised over local excision versus a likely abdominoperineal resection. Or how radiotherapy gets you later, with continence now dependent on loperamide. Chemotherapy also had its moments; exercise-induced laryngeal spasm was certainly interesting, though transient, but my feet were not so lucky; neuropathy appears permanent. But you could glean all these complications from textbooks. Something else is on my mind.

As a doctor, I had the advantage of being well informed. The lymph node was a blow, but against it was the might of Western medicine. Two boxers in a ring — cancer in the red corner and chemo in the blue — battling for my life as the prize. Two major players for sure, but what about my role in the conflict? Just an interested spectator, cheering from the sidelines? No, that won't do, the stakes are too high.

Thirty years a doctor, but also a Christian, I have long subscribed to the WHO view that wellbeing requires physical, mental, and spiritual health. Where physical health is compromised, say by tonsillitis or a hernia, physical treatment is indicated and we're unlikely to talk God. But not all conditions are so straightforward. In Margate, countless patients present with anxiety, depression, anger, self-hatred, low self-esteem, addiction, and bitterness. Such issues possess a strong spiritual component requiring spiritual solutions. That's where God comes in, but there's more.

In 2001, three professors from the US published *Handbook of Religion and Health*. They had discovered that worldwide, between 1800 and 2000, there was a wealth of research investigating the role

of religion in disease that the scientific community had hitherto ignored. The great majority of the studies originated from the US and pertained to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. And with thousands more articles published in the following decade, a second edition came out in 2012.¹

A taste of their extraordinary findings: 81% of all studies showed religion benefits health. With only 4% showing harm, religion leads to greater happiness, morale, optimism, and meaning in life. It reduces anxiety and the religious are not only less depressed, but recover up to 70% faster if depression sets in. Patients with schizophrenia function better; alcohol and drug misuse is reduced in 85% of studies; and suicidal ideation, delinquency, and crime were also found to fall in nearly three-quarters of all reports.

What about physical disease? Again, religion is beneficial with regular church attendance associated with less coronary heart disease, 66% fewer infarcts, and 40% less death in men aged >60 years. Hypertension and mortality plummet following coronary artery bypass grafting, and disability following a stroke and other causes also falls. Also, with religion, cancer incidence decreases and even if the disease does develop, survival is improved.

So faith in God is relevant to all diseases yet studied. Impressed, I summarised the findings in my book, *God — I've Got Cancer*, published last year.² The aim was to encourage all those, like myself, unfortunate enough to develop serious illness, to practise evidence-based medicine by getting the best possible treatment and to pray.

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Richard has recovered from cancer himself. He has worked as a surgeon, a GP, and an evangelist in England, India and parts of Africa. In his book, intended for patients with cancer, their families and friends, he offers encouragement for all who suffer and who want to know whether there is a God to whom they can turn. Richard's wife Heather is also a doctor and they have three daughters.

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