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Doctors Get a Little Help from Above

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A patient dies on the operating table, but surgeon John Riesch of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, is able to revive him. When he regains consciousness, the doctor asks whether he remembers anything.

“I had the nicest visit with Tommy,” the patient replies.

“Tommy. Who’s that?” the doctor inquires.

“You don’t know him. We lost our son so many years ago. He said, ‘Dad, I’ve been waiting for you for so long. It’s nice to see you.’”

Doctor Riesch says he’s had lots of patients who’ve reported out of body experiences during his four decades of surgical experience. “That’s exciting and it really makes you believe. No matter how smart you become in your field of medicine or whatever, there’s something else controlling all of this,” asserts Dr. Riesch.

Another surgeon from half a world away has reached a similar conclusion. Munci Kalayoglu, MD, Chairman of the Department of Surgery, Memorial Hospital, Istanbul, Turkey, recalls a patient whose heart stopped five times during the helicopter trip from a rural area in Wisconsin to the hospital in Madison where he practiced for many years. Her liver shut down and she was in need of an immediate transplant.

“On the way from the intensive care unit to the operating room, the patient’s heart stopped again,” recalls Kalayoglu. He says the anesthesiologist thought he was crazy to even try transplanting this patient because she was already dead! “No,” he says. “We did it.” Within 11 days, the patient went home. “You call it coincidence or miracle or God. I say it’s God,” states Dr. Kalayoglu.

Another surgeon, a former colleague of Kalayoglu’s, also bows to a higher power. “Packing off some bleeding, closing your eyes, saying a quick prayer and asking for a little bit of help to get bailed out of a difficult situation, has happened to me on more than one occasion,” says Layton Ridders, MD, Chairman, Department of Surgery at the University of Wisconsin Hospital. “I don’t pretend to understand all of this, but certainly there are forces much greater than ourselves that must be at work,” adds Ridders, who’s also editor of the *Annals of Surgery*.

Surgeons may be the ones who are confronted most directly with these life and death situations, but they're not the only ones who are convinced spirituality plays a role in survival. Plenty of other physicians also report experiences that they cannot explain in scientific terms, either.

"Many physicians and nurses have intuitive and anecdotal impressions that the beliefs and religious practices of patients have a profound affect upon their experiences with illness and the threat of dying," according to the Ethics in Medicine from the University of Washington School of Medicine's website. "It is generally accepted that religious affiliation is correlated with a reduction in the incidence of some diseases such as cancer and coronary artery disease."

Michael Miller, MD, president of the American Society of Addiction Medicine, is a believer in the power of faith. Miller is a psychiatrist who practices in Madison, Wisconsin.

"She should have died a million times," Dr. Miller says of an alcoholic patient he treated over many years. "I detoxed her a million times. It was one of those cases where you can't help but be humbled because you know that it isn't up to you. God was keeping this lady alive," says Dr. Miller, who notes that this patient eventually did succumb to the many health problems linked to alcoholism.

"All of us in medicine need to be grateful for the experience and the opportunity, and to realize what we can do and what we can't do. There is stuff that's bigger than us," adds Miller.

In spite of all their rigorous, evidence-based training and experience, it may seem odd that these men of science would be open to the notion of God's influence. But Dr. John Riesch says man's knowledge can only take us so far.

"With medicine, people think it's a science. It's not," says Riesch. "There are so many things we don't know, that it boggles the mind. You learn that you are not all in control."

Yes, doctors play a significant role in a patient's recovery, but Riesch says there are times he knows that he had nothing to do with a person's revival.

"You see people come back from death's bed, not from me. I may push a button here or there to make sure they get the electrolytes correct, blood counts, but man..."

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