

## Empathy, Prayer, and Patient Care

Dr. David Carsten



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Dr. David Carsten

WSU, Pullman 1980 BS Biochemistry  
University of Washington 1984, DDS

Assistant Clinical Professor, OHSU  
1995-2008  
Assistant Clinical Professor, USC  
2007-2012

MAGD 2002  
Award of Distinction, ADI, 2005

Dentist Anesthesiologist,  
Lutheran Medical Center 2010  
Brooklyn, New York

Mentor of the COORS study group

Graduation Speaker 2015,  
Centralia College Outstanding Alumni  
Award

Commissioner with DQAC Washington  
State 2016 to present

ADA Steering Committee for  
DL OSCE 2017 to present

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She had a talk show, and book contracts but quickly, she lost her husband, daughter, and everything she owned. She almost committed suicide.

"In my deepest, darkest moments, what really got me through was a prayer. Sometimes my prayer was **'Help me.'** Sometimes a prayer was **'Thank you.'** **What I've discovered is that intimate connection and communication with my creator will always get me through because I know my support, my help, is just a prayer away.**"

Iyanla Vanzant

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In the Christian tradition, prayer can take many different forms, including:

"God help us!"

- **conversational prayer**, in which a person engages in an informal conversation with God about day-to-day matters, seeking guidance and counsel, or expressing gratitude for life and wellbeing;

- **meditative prayer**, in which a person contemplates spiritual themes and the relationship of the divine to mankind;

- **ritual prayer**, which takes the form of reciting or reading well known prayers such as the Lord's Prayer;

- **intercessory prayer**, characterised by petitions on behalf of others for their health and wellbeing.

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**Prayer as medicine: how much have we learned?**

Relaxation Response

Prayer as Placebo

Positive Emotions

Relational

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**"The problem with studying religion scientifically is that you do violence to the phenomenon by reducing it to basic elements that can be quantified, and that makes for bad science and bad religion,"**

said Dr. Richard Sloan, a professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia and author of the book,

"Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine."

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**Herbert Benson, MD, Harvard**  
has studied prayer for the last 30 years  
**Buddhist meditation in particular**

All forms of prayer can evoke a  
**relaxation response**  
quells stress  
quiets the body  
promotes healing  
by **decreasing sympathetic tone**  
(**valsalva maneuver, incentive spirometer**)

Most prayer involves repetition  
-- focus on sounds and words  
-- and therein lies the entry to the process

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**MRI brain scans**

When combined with University of Pennsylvania studies—

A picture of complex brain activity during prayer:

As an individual goes deeper and deeper into concentration

1. **intense activity** begins taking place in the brain's **parietal lobe circuits** — those that control a person's orientation in space and establish distinctions between self and the world.

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Benson describes a "quietude" that then **envelops the entire brain.**

2. At the same time, **frontal and temporal lobe circuits** (which track time and create self-awareness) —**become disengaged.**

3. ~~The mind-body connection dissolves.~~

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4. **The limbic system** "emotional tagging system" **becomes activated.**

**also regulates**  
relaxation  
ultimately controlling the autonomic nervous system  
heart rate  
blood pressure  
metabolism  
and more

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5. **The result:**  
your focus can become emotionally significant  
Many feel a **sense of awe and quiet.**

The body becomes more **relaxed** and **physiological activity becomes more evenly regulated.**

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**When this happens...**

**Are we communicating with a higher being – are we "hard-wired" at the factory to do just that?**

**purely subjective**

☆ **If you're religious, it is God-given.**

☆ **If you're not religious, it comes from the brain, an evolutionary advantage.**

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## The Seven Habits of Successful Health Care Providers

Reflective, Meditative

Self

Hope

Compassion

Curiosity

Communication

Discretion

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## Confirmation Bias

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## Toast causes cancer.

Acrylamide has **always** been present in some foods, but this wasn't known until Swedish scientists first found it in certain foods in 2002.  
— **American Cancer Society** (website)

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Christopher Ramsden of NIH SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN 1/11/2017  
**Records Found in Dusty Basement Undermine Decades of Dietary Advice**  
40-year-old study How data from a 40-year-old study raises new questions about fat  
vegetable fats instead of animal fats...good for the heart?  
The study, the **largest gold-standard experiment** testing that idea, found **the opposite was true**  
12 April 2017 in BMJ report of this late 1970's study  
**failure to publish the results of clinical trials can undermine truth and harm the public**  
9,423 study participants, ages 20 to 97  
generated a single paper that did not use the data.

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Empathy is part of  
politics  
science  
life  
it can be used for good or evil

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Why?

A lack of empathy is a very common patient complaint.

Why is empathy so lacking in much of health care?

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**An Introductory Philosophy of Medicine: Humanizing Modern Medicine**  
By James A. Marcum

Osler, in 1943  
**imperturbability**  
**composure with the misfortunes of our neighbors**

Charles Aring, in 1958  
distinguished between sympathy,  
which hinders a physician's effectiveness,  
and empathy which enhances that effectiveness.  
**"Detached yet interested."**

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May 24, 1958  
SYMPATHY AND EMPATHY  
Charles D. Aring, M.D.  
JAMA. 1958;167(4):448-452.

The act or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another is known as sympathy. Empathy, on the other hand, not only is an identification of sorts but also connotes an awareness of one's separateness from the observed. One of the most difficult tasks put upon man is reflective commitment to another's problem while maintaining his own identity. The ways in which one person may react to another are infinite. A subtle and significant feature of a happy medical practice is to remain unencumbered by the patient's problem.

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man is reflective commitment to another's problem while maintaining his own identity. The ways in which one person may react to another are infinite. A subtle and significant feature of a **happy medical practice is to remain unencumbered by the patient's problem.**

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**Barriers**

No to Vulnerability

Prize Perfectionism

Tied to Outcomes

Projections Personal Outcomes

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JAMA. 2005 Mar 2;293(9):1100-6.  
Clinical empathy as emotional labor in the patient-physician relationship.  
Larson EB, Yao X.

**"physicians are more effective healers--and enjoy more professional satisfaction--when they engage in the process of empathy."**

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**The New York Times**

April 11, 2012

**Pre-Med's New Priorities: Heart and Soul and Social Science**  
By [SAMUEL ROSENBERG](#)

50% of the new MCAT for admissions beginning in 2015 has a new focus...to choose doctors that are inherently empathetic. Will it choose the scientist/humanist/spiritual doctor they want? Someone who will **listen and understand people?**

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**How do we learn empathy?**

Empathy is in our own wiring. A talent and a skill, about 96% have some empathic ability

By example.

By performing with others in front of a crowd.

By reading about the inner life of people.

By movies.

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# Mirror Neurons

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premotor cortex  
supplementary motor area  
primary somatosensory cortex  
inferior parietal cortex

learning language and physical actions  
theory of mind skills

**empathy**

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Mirroring

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**Sympathy** ↔ **Empathy**

Emotional response to the suffering of another.

Understanding the feelings, thoughts, or suffering of another.

Dr. Mohammadreza Hojat, Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior and the Director of Jefferson Longitudinal Study, Jefferson Medical College, Empathy in Patient Care: Antecedents, Development and Outcomes published by Springer in 2007.

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**Compassion**

Deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it.

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**Sympathy** ↔ **Empathy**

**ME**                      **YOU**

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**Placebo Effects in Guidelines, Practice, and Patient Choice:**

Beginning a Conversation about an Under-recognized Therapeutic Tool

White Paper | May 2014

Informed Medical Decisions Foundation  
John D. Stoeckle Center for Primary Care  
at Massachusetts General Hospital  
Program in Placebo Studies, Beth Israel Deaconess  
Medical Center/Harvard Medical School

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**Asthma**

no difference between the drug and placebo

**IBS**

significant improvement

better than the "real" drug

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**The Jefferson Scale of Empathy**

measures empathy in physicians and other health professionals (HP/Physician version), medical students (S-version), and health professional students (HPStudent version).

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**Training, in the last 100 years, has served to degrade empathy.**

**Clinical Inattention**

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**Doctors have less Burnout and Better Patient Care With Mindfulness Training**

10-30-2013  
Wake Forest Medical Center  
Training of 3rd year medical students to decrease long term stress and burnout while in practice.

**PAY ATTENTION**

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**Repeat Over and Over  
the attitude or behavior or value  
you desire**

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**Pay Attention  
Mindfulness Takes Practice  
Reinforce Positives**

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**Pay  
Mindfulness  
Attention**

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**Pay  
Mindfulness  
Attention**

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**Empathy**

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**Sympathy**

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**Compassion**

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**Loving  
Kindness**

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Each profession has its own time pressures:

- Challenges to you being empathetic
- How can they be overcome?
- Impact of your empathetic behaviour?

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Psychology Today June 2014  
Clay Routledge Ph.D.

**Five scientifically-supported benefits of prayer:**

1. Prayer improves self-control
2. Prayer makes you nicer
3. Prayer makes you more forgiving
4. Prayer increases trust people pray together with a close friend increased feelings of unity and trust. Social prayer
5. Prayer offsets the negative health effects of stress —decreases sympathetic tone  
—**thinking about the welfare of others may be a crucial component of receiving personal benefits from prayer**

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"We're not looking at prayer as an alternative to angioplasty," he adds. "We're very high-tech people here. We're looking at whether in all of the energy and interest we have put into systematic investigation of high-tech medicine, if we have actually missed the boat. **Have we ignored the rest of the human being -- the need for something more -- that could make all the high-tech stuff work better?"**

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#### Studies on intercessory prayer

2006 meta analysis on 14 studies concluded that there is **"no discernible effect"**

K. Masters, G. Spielmann, J. Goodson "Are there demonstrable effects of distant intercessory prayer? A meta-analytic review." Annals of Behavioral Medicine 2006 Aug;32(1):21-6.

2007 systemic review of intercessory prayer reported inconclusive results, noting that 7 of 17 studies had "small, but significant, effect sizes" but the review noted that the most methodologically rigorous studies **failed** to produce significant findings.

Ivaid R. Hodges, "A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature on Intercessory Prayer" in Research on Social Work Practice March 2007 vol. 17 no. 2 174-187

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**This study cost \$2.4 million, and most of the money came from the John Templeton Foundation, which supports research into spirituality.**

**The government has spent more than \$2.3 million on prayer research since 2000. (2013)**

Dean Marek, a chaplain at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and a coauthor of the report, said the study said **nothing about the power of personal prayer or about prayers for family members and friends.**

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Working in a large medical center like Mayo, Mr. Marek said, "You hear tons of stories about the power of prayer, and I don't doubt them."

In the study, the researchers monitored **1,802 patients at six hospitals** who received coronary bypass surgery, in which doctors reroute circulation around a clogged vein or artery.

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**three groups**

Two were prayed for; the third was not.  
Half the patients who received the prayers were told that they were being prayed for  
Half were told that they might or might not receive prayers

The researchers asked the members of three congregations — St. Paul's Monastery in St. Paul; the Community of Teresian Carmelites in Worcester, Mass.; and Silent Unity, a Missouri prayer ministry near Kansas City — to deliver the prayers, using the patients' first names and the first initials of their last names. The congregations were told that they could pray in their own ways, but they were **instructed to include the phrase, "for a successful surgery with a quick, healthy recovery and no complications."**

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**Analyzing complications in the 30 days after the operations, the researchers found no differences between those patients who were prayed for and those who were not.**

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Some participants complained that this mechanical way they were told to pray as part of the experiment was unusual for them.

Complications of surgery occurred in 52 percent of those who received prayer (Group 1), 51 percent of those who did not receive it (Group 2), and 59 percent of patients who knew they would receive prayers (Group 3).

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CS Lewis concluded that we cannot scientifically test intercessory prayer because, the **“real purpose and the nominal purpose of your prayers are at variance”** and **“whatever your tongue and teeth and knees may do, you are not praying.”**

**The experiment, he concluded, “demands an impossibility.”**

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## Take Aways

Relational

Pay attention to others and yourself

Have empathy

Healing

Pray for you

Intercessory prayers as an experiment?

Thank you for your prayers for me.

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