As we talked about her three year old son’s impending operation, it became clear that this mother was full of irrational fears. I tried, but failed, to reassure her that the procedure would be very straightforward. ‘Lord,’ I prayed silently, ‘This mum is so anxious, please help me find the right words to say.’ I found myself asking audibly, ‘Do you believe in God?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘I’m a Catholic.’

‘Do you believe that God loves your child?’ I asked. ‘I suppose he does, though I don’t think I’ve thought about that before.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I promise to pray that God will look after him if you do the same. He is more than able to see him through the operation, don’t you think?’ She agreed hesitatingly, and the consultation came to an end. On admission to the ward some weeks later she and her boy were given a ‘parent and child’ cubicle. It very soon became clear that things were not going to be easy – this mother’s anxiety level was ‘sky-high’ and made all our efforts to care for her boy exceptionally difficult. The operation came and went uneventfully. The boy was discharged home after a few days.

Some weeks later, the boy made his return visit to my clinic. His post-operative progress had been uneventful – thankfully. When I thought the consultation was finished, I said, ‘So God answered our prayers then?’

She replied, ‘Mr Fyfe, I think something strange is happening; I think God is speaking to me.’

‘What makes you say that?’ I asked, with another silent prayer.

It was a fascinating story. On the way out of the local supermarket one morning, she had been struggling with her boy in one arm, and the bag of foodstuff in the other. A stranger helpfully opened the shop door and then offered to carry her shopping bag to her car in the car park. On the way there, this unknown woman said, ‘I hope you don’t mind me saying this but I’m a Christian, and as I was praying this morning, into my mind came a picture of a little boy – and it was your boy. Do you mind if we pray for a minute?’ So, there in the local car park, this unknown lady prayed with a perfect stranger.

‘Mr Fyfe, I think God is speaking to me.’

To this I readily agreed, and suggested that during the coming week she should simply ask God to speak to her each day, and then read one of the Gospels. She promised to come to our Church the following Sunday morning.

When she did arrive at Church that next Sunday, she was wearing what appeared to be a very expensive purplish (my wife says-lilac!) gown. Remarkably, the preacher that morning spoke on the parable that Jesus told about the rich person dressed in purple.1 This lady quietly wept throughout the service.

Elizabeth Croton asks if doctors should enquire about

Spirituality

Patients entering hospital experience a variety of emotions and utilise differing coping mechanisms to help them. One such mechanism is the presence of a personal religious faith.1 Increasingly, it is recognised that faith and hope are valuable adjuncts to the healing process.2,3 Yet there has not been much research on doctors’ roles in patients’ spiritual affairs. Research carried out in a pulmonary outpatient department indicated that 94% of patients would welcome physician enquiry into such issues but only 15% had ever had experience of this.4 Physicians themselves report varying approaches to spiritual assessment but they affirmed that spiritual discussion should be approached with sensitivity and integrity.5

Method

I carried out an 11-point interviewer-directed questionnaire survey to determine participants’ religious backgrounds, practices and views regarding physician enquiry into their spiritual beliefs. South Birmingham Local Research Ethics Committee approval was obtained. Hospital inpatients on acute wards in a Birmingham teaching hospital were randomly selected (using the PAS computer database system) for inclusion into the study between August and November 2001. Patients who lacked sufficient mental capacity to answer the questions posed were excluded. No patient refused to take part.

Results

The group of 43 patients was 53% female, 58% over 60 years of age and 98% white European. 63% said they were Christian but 56% never attended church and only 18% attended weekly, 77% believed in God, but only 56% believed in life after death. 81% had never had a doctor enquire about their religious

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At lunch in our home later she told me about her week. She said, ‘I don’t know what is happening to me. Normally I can’t get up in the mornings. I’m always rushing frantically at the last minute to get the children ready for school, things are usually chaotic. This week, however, I’ve been waking at 6 am, and I’m desperate to read the Bible, and I can’t stop praying! I’ve learnt so much, and I feel so much at peace’. 

This lady was radiant with a new-found joy that only Christ could bring, she had found the Lord without realising it. I said, ‘I believe you have been born again. You asked God to speak to you, and he did; you opened yourself to him and read his Word, and he has come – at your invitation.’

There, in our lounge, I had the privilege of praying with this lady whom the loving God had carefully and persistently sought and found. It was a special holy moment, and a fresh realisation for me that God will stop at nothing to seek and to find the lost so that he came ‘that they may have life and have it to the full’.1 I thank God for a faithful unknown Christian lady in a shopping centre who dared to be obedient to her Lord, who dared to pray with a stranger, not knowing the response. I thank God for allowing me to witness the wonder of his new birth, the transforming work of grace in someone’s life.

And so it was. Her mind and heart were at peace, knowing that her God was in control. It made all the difference in the world. ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.’3

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