

Christian doctors have an important role discerning miracle claims, says **Brad Burke**

Looking for a Miracle

KEY POINTS

Many doctors believe that God still performs miracles of physical healing that defy natural explanation, but claimed contemporary miracles are often not miracles at all. Much of the confusion arises from the loose use of terms like 'blind', 'paralysed' or 'confined to a wheelchair' but misunderstanding of doctors' explanations, medical errors and cyclical or self-limiting diseases also contribute to false claims and unrealistic expectations, which are in turn further inflated by hearsay. Answers to prayer are always wonderful but we must also be truthful about the results, and Christian doctors have an important role to play in discerning the validity of miraculous claims.

Not long ago I heard the story of a woman whose teenage daughter was severely disabled with cerebral palsy. For several agonising years, the mother prayed that God would work a miracle and heal her daughter. Nothing happened. Then, a friend and two other Christians approached the mother. 'God gave me a vision that your daughter will soon be miraculously healed,' one said. Another said she had a dream that the daughter walked upright.

The mother's hopes lifted. But the days slipped into weeks... the weeks into months... and still, no miracle. To date, this woman's daughter remains terribly crippled with cerebral palsy; I can't help but wonder whether this woman's faith has remained resilient despite the false hope given by so-called friends.

Perhaps, like me, you've had patients who have prayed for a miracle from God. Maybe you've sat motionless by their bedsides, unsure of what to say, as tears streamed down their cheeks. They've read book after book heralding miracles. They've heard incredible stories of divine healings. All the while their spirits spiral downward as they wonder why God won't intervene on their behalf.

A full examination

Christian doctors have an important role to play in discerning the validity of miraculous claims. Many, including myself, believe God still performs miracles of physical healing that defy natural explanation. But are the hosts of 'miracles' we hear about so often truly miracles?

Paul writes, 'Test everything' (1 Thessalonians

5:21). I did just that after reading the account of a three year old girl who suffered a broken leg along with brain and abdominal trauma in a horrendous car accident. The author wrote that the girl had 37 tubes in her body and that the doctors told the parents on the fourth day that she would need to remain in intensive care for at least two months, followed by six to eight months in the hospital learning to walk again.

When the child was discharged from the hospital eleven days later, the author labeled the healing a genuine miracle. He went on to write of other events, including the miraculous healing of her leg curvature and limp.

I called the author and asked him for additional details. 37 tubes in a three year old child with blunt trauma and no abdominal surgery is an absurd number. Also, a medical specialist cannot - and would not - predict on the fourth day exactly how long it would take for a comatose three year old to be discharged from the paediatric intensive care unit and begin walking again. The doctors might have given a worst-case scenario, but the author's wording never implied this. Furthermore, orthopedic surgeons are seldom worried about curvatures and leg length discrepancies in young children who have recently suffered a broken leg. Why? Children's bones usually grow out to correct for such deformities.

Terminology turmoil

A significant factor in play in the confusion over miracles is the words and phrases used by non-medical lay people in books and in healing services. ■ 'Blind' for example, can mean total blindness,

legally blind, tunnel vision or just plain rotten eyesight.

- 'Paralysed' can mean anything from 50 to 100 percent loss of strength in a limb.
- 'Confined to a wheelchair' is a phrase that has been applied to patients who can stand up only to transfer into bed, can walk 20 feet with a walker, or can walk unassisted within the home but need a wheelchair in public places.

For a 'blind' person to see vague images, a 'paralysed' person to perform deep knee bends, or a person 'confined to a wheelchair' to get up and walk is rarely a miracle.

The doctor said so

Unfortunately, many people, doctors included, tend to throw around the word miracle at will. For example, if a patient narrowly survives a life-threatening sickness when there was only a five percent chance or less of living, the doctor will usually agree with the family that it's a miracle. But if you were to sit down with the doctor for half an hour, he or she could probably supply at least one rational theory of how natural forces contributed to the healing process.

The unexplainable

I hear the phrase, 'The doctors couldn't explain it!' used quite a bit. The truth is that doctors can't fully explain a lot of things. Why someone catches a cold and recovers in six days while someone else catches the same virus from the same person and recovers in only three days is a bit of a mystery. It doesn't make the case a miracle.

Medical errors

When boxing champ Evander Holyfield (pictured above) was supposedly healed of a noncompliant left ventricle at a Benny Hinn crusade, Hinn labeled it a miracle. Later, it was discovered that the cardiologist had misdiagnosed the problem because he was not informed of the whopping amounts of morphine and fluid Holyfield had received post-fight, which made it appear as if his heart were malfunctioning. As reported in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, Holyfield later admitted, 'I don't think there was anything wrong with my heart to begin with'.

Vanishing diseases

Fortunately for us, most diseases we acquire are cyclical or self-limiting. The symptoms of diseases such as allergies, arthritis, lupus and multiple sclerosis tend to fluctuate like the stock markets - down one month, up the next. Most episodes of joint pain, nausea, headaches, abdominal cramping and skin rashes often disappear over a period of days or weeks. God has ingeniously hardwired our bodies to heal themselves. While rare, the spontaneous remission of cancer is well documented. In 1999, *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine* cited a veteran oncologist who, in treating

6,000 cancer patients, observed twelve cases where the cancer suddenly and mysteriously disappeared for good.

Can these spontaneous remissions be attributed to a biological mechanism? Perhaps, states a 1998 *In Vivo* article, indicating that this phenomenon is reported most often in certain cancers: neuroblastomas, malignant melanomas, renal cell carcinomas and lymphomas/leukemias.

Hearsay

The Agony of Deceit includes a chapter by retired US Surgeon General C Everett Koop MD, who described a conversation he had with a woman following a church service:

'God can do anything!' [she proclaimed.] 'I once knew a woman who went into the hospital to be fitted for a glass eye, and while the surgeon turned his back to get an instrument, he turned back to find a new eye in the empty socket where there had been nothing before, and the woman could see!' I said, 'Did you say you knew this woman?'

'No. I knew someone who knows her,' she conceded. 'Well,' I said, 'could you tell me who he or she is? I would like to have a conversation with that person.' *'Well, I don't really know that person either but I know someone who knows her.'* *'Even so,' I persisted, 'I would like to meet that person.'* *'I don't really know that person, but she knows someone who knows someone...'* *And so it goes.*

If the woman's story actually happened as she insisted, the patient, the patient's family and the doctor would all be on a major network TV station the next day. Why do we never read in reputable newspapers, or see on reputable news networks, stories of eyeballs instantly appearing in previously empty eye sockets?

Proceed with caution

When you next hear the word 'miracle' I encourage you to keep these points in mind. Could the astonishing healing be hearsay? Could the human body have healed itself - temporarily or permanently - from a cyclical or self-limiting disease? Did the doctor truly believe that natural forces could not explain the healing in any way? Is the layperson's information surrounding the 'miracle' medically accurate?

The amount of medical confusion and misinformation in books, magazines, television, newspapers, the Internet, church services and on the street is staggering. If your patients are eagerly awaiting a healing touch from God, remember that answers to prayer are always wonderful, whether they can be explained by natural forces or solely by divine intervention. Our duty is to respect our patients' personal beliefs while lovingly conveying the truth.

A longer version of this article was published in Physician Magazine (March/April 2004)

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