

## Interview with Fabio Nasri / Geriatrician

# Evidence shows patients' belief systems should be integrated into medical care

The following is a translation and summary of an [article](#) printed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2023 in *O Globo* regarding a new initiative integrating spirituality into medical care at the Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo, Brazil.



For the coordinator of the team focused on spirituality in the Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo, the research evidence shows that patients' treatment should take their belief systems into account.

**Dr. Fabio Nasri (Geriatrician)** is the coordinator of a medical group focused on spirituality in the renowned Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo, Brazil. This team was set up in February 2023 in response to the growing volume of research studies demonstrating the influence that spirituality has on patients' health outcomes. In his view, "when a patient is admitted into the hospital, it is not just a heart or an appendix that is admitted. The whole being needs to be taken into consideration, including the spiritual dimension. It can be a powerful, additional tool to promote health."

### Separation of Medicine and Spirituality

"Spirituality is a part of people. Even if they do not have a belief system or a religion, they still interact with Nature, with the climate and the sun. We cannot neglect this dimension in people, as it would be setting aside something intrinsic to them when providing healthcare treatment. Historically healthcare and spirituality were separated, one from the other, however nowadays in Brazil and elsewhere around the world, there is a move to bring them together. We cannot

simply tell a patient that they have cancer, that they will have complicated surgery or that they have a chronic disease, without treating them as a whole human being. Spirituality cannot be left out of the conversation. It can, in fact be an additional element in our therapeutic arsenal.

In ancient times, medicine and healing was dealt with by shamans and others who were responsible for spirituality in their communities. However, since the time of Descartes and the Age of Reason and the rise of science, there was an implicit agreement that the church would care for the soul and science and medicine would care for the body. Science was in a process of development and medicine took a reductionist approach.

## **Re-integration of Medicine and Spirituality**

In more recent times, we have seen several noteworthy scientific studies, such as those regarding Near Death Experiences (NDEs). NDEs, which involved people who briefly ‘died’ clinically and who returned saying they had met loved ones. Other researchers started to publish case studies of past life memories. There are impressive cases involving children of a very young age who remembered previous lifetimes. Around the same time, better health outcomes started to be observed in patients in whom spirituality was more present. These patients did better in several areas.

## **What effect does Spirituality have on patients?**

They recover better from illnesses, such as post-op recovery. I am not talking about a cure but rather about how they experience and go through such a difficult period. Research studies show that those who really believe, that have a strong faith, have better outcomes. This has been notable, and the volume of studies has grown. There is no going back.

## **Has Science proven these clinical benefits?**

Different articles have shown for example, that when a person prays, irrespective of their religion, the heart rate tends to drop, and blood pressure falls. It reduces the activity of the sympathetic nervous system which is responsible for increasing blood pressure and the heart rate. It improves cerebral perfusion and activates sensations of pleasure and wellbeing with the release of oxytocin and serotonin. And there is no need necessarily for a particular place of worship for this to occur. A person could be appreciating music, a sunset, meditating or doing yoga. Normally those who engage with the above, end up being healthier, due to the way they behave. However, there is another side to this as well.

## **When can Spirituality harm one’s health?**

There are people who say they are religious but do not integrate these values into their day to day lives. So, they don’t reap the benefits. There are others who believe that their faith alone

will heal them. So, they don't engage with medical treatment. Or go to places where they believe they will get healing in Nature, but these are not appropriate places. They need medical care as well. What we see in medicine, is that simply having faith, is not enough to guarantee a cure. However, without it, it can be more difficult.

### **Does the sensitive nature of this subject explain why doctors are so reluctant to bring it up with patients?**

There are studies showing that patients would prefer if doctors addressed this during their consultation. Plus, there are studies showing that doctors (including in Brazil, which is a leader on research in this area), would like to speak more about this with their patients. However, many doctors are concerned that their patients will think that they are trying to win them over to their spiritual belief. Apart from this, in a consultation where a doctor needs to check blood pressure, cholesterol, treat cancer, assess someone's memory, etc. there is not always time left over to approach this. However, the main issue is that doctors are not trained in this area. It is not just a question of saying something like, "so, do you have any religious beliefs?" There is a strategy, a better approach. Few medical schools in Brazil give lectures on this.

### **Did the pandemic reinforce the importance of Spirituality at critical times?**

The other day, I arrived at the hospital early in the morning to see some patients and I was surprised when I saw the team that was about to start the day shift forming a circle and praying that all would go well. So that they could be an instrument of care and support for the sick. I subsequently saw that this was being done at various points in the hospital. That perhaps is one legacy of Covid. One of the greatest researchers in this area has advocated the benefits of doctors praying with their patients before an operation or a procedure. However, up to now it is not widely practiced.

### **Which way is the research going?**

Many studies show a positive association between spirituality and good health outcomes. Various Brazilian medical organisations already take this into account. A big leap forward would be knowing *how* this happens. It is easy to explain, and for a person to understand, that when they pray, meditate, or go to a waterfall that this is beneficial to the endocrine system, the cardiac system etc. The issue is how this occurs at a cellular level. What protein is involved? How does this energy get in? Is it something to do with DNA? We just don't know. We need to open up our minds. It will be a while before we find out.

### **Original article in Portuguese:**

<https://oglobo.globo.com/saude/medicina/noticia/2023/03/espiritualidade-na-medicina-fe-nao-garante-cura-mas-sem-ela-fica-mais-dificil-diz-geriatria.ghtml>