

LARGEST SUCH REPORT EVER DONE

Prayers don't improve patient health, study says

Those prayed for might have felt added pressure, some say

BY JEREMY MANIER
Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO — Praying for a sick cardiac patient may feel right to people of faith, but it doesn't appear to improve the patient's health, according to a new study that is the largest ever done on the healing powers of prayer.

Researchers from Harvard Medical School and five other U.S. medical centers found, to their bewilderment, that coronary bypass patients who knew strangers were praying for them fared significantly worse than people who got no prayers.

The team speculated that telling the patients about the prayers may have caused "performance anxiety," or perhaps a fear that doctors expected the worst.

The mammoth prayer study cost \$2.4 million and enrolled 1,802 bypass surgery patients.

The majority of funding came from the British-based John Templeton Foundation, which supports research at the intersection of science and religion.

Previous studies had examined the power of prayer for medical patients, with mixed results. Most did not have the statistical power to reliably detect any effects of prayer.

The new study, which appears in the April issue of the *American Heart Journal*, was designed to be large enough to see whether patients who knew they were being prayed for had better recoveries.

The people who prayed for the patients were strangers, either Roman Catholic monks or believers belonging to other Christian denominations. They were instructed to give a simple prayer for a quick recovery with no complications.

Some patients received prayers but were not informed of that. In the second group the patients got no prayers, and also were not informed one way or the other. The third group got prayers and were told so.

There was virtually no differ-

ence in complication rates between patients in the first two groups. The third group, in which patients knew they were receiving prayers, had a complication rate of 59 percent, compared with 52 percent in the no-prayer group.

Researchers had expected that knowing someone was praying for the patients might help bring about a state of well-being, which can reduce strain on the heart.

An accompanying editorial in the journal criticized the study authors for taking "an almost casual approach toward any explanation."

The editorial authors, led by Dr. Mitchell Krucoff of Duke University Medical Center, wrote that the study leaders had not anticipated that prayer might be harmful and had "allowed cultural presumption to undermine scientific objectivity."

