

Did prayers to God help cure cancer?

Patient and doctors believe divine intervention helped aggressive brain tumor go into remission

By Don Teague Correspondent NBC News Updated: 9:30 a.m. ET March 25, 2005

Durham, N.C. - By all medical standards, Andy Delbridge should be dead. The North Carolina father of two was diagnosed three years ago with the most aggressive and dangerous type of brain tumor.

"It was just devastation. I thought, 'I'm not going to make it, I'm just not going to make it,' " says Delbridge. His chances of surviving were no more than a few months.

"Half the patients are dead within 12 months of diagnosis. The overall survival at several years out is felt to be 2, maybe 5 percent," says Dr. Henry Friedman, a neuro-oncologist at Duke University.

But despite long odds, Delbridge underwent surgery, radiation and painful chemotherapy. And while putting his trust in doctors at Duke University Hospital, Delbridge also put his faith in God.

Members of Delbridge's church prayed for him daily. He and his family asked for divine intervention.

"I prayed for a miracle, I really did. I said, 'God, I know you can do it,' " says Andy's wife, Nancy.

"The minute you think that you have no hope, you are down for the count. So you've got to always think there's hope," says Andy.

Today Delbridge is cancer free. Not only is the brain tumor gone, so are the growths that had appeared near his heart. They simply disappeared, without surgery.

For decades the medical community basically ignored the impact of religion on health. But in recent years, scientists have begun studying the possibility that faith matters.

Dr. Harold Koenig leads Duke University's Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of studies — scientific studies — that show that religious people are healthier," says Koenig.

Even Dr. Friedman — who treated Delbridge's cancer — says faith can't be ignored.

"I think it's critical. I can't quantify it. I can't measure it. I can't do a test to prove that there is some special ingredient to therapy associated with faith," he says.

Still, others say people of faith are simply more optimistic — which means less stress — and that in general they lead healthier lives.

"There's virtually no evidence about the personal benefits of prayer. Certainly lots of people find it rewarding, but there's very little evidence about any health benefits," says Dr. Richard P. Sloan, associate professor of psychiatry and director of behavioral medicine at Columbia University.

But Andy Delbridge has all the evidence he needs. Delbridge says, "I believe he answered my prayers. I really do."