

Prayer and Scalpel: Surgeons Who Pray for Patients

It used to be when you ended up in a hospital, you'd expect the doctors to just deal with your physical condition. If you wanted someone to pay attention to your spiritual needs, you'd have to find a chaplain or pastor.

But that's not necessarily true anymore. A number of doctors these days are willing to personally help you call on the Great Physician.

It would be against Dallas heart surgeon Mark Pool's medical oath if he didn't study every patient's case before operating. But he feels it would go against his Christian calling if he didn't at least offer to pray with all his patients.

"God is the Great Physician. He is the One who controls life and death," Pool said, explaining his desire to keep his patients and himself in contact with God.

God's Scalpel

Pool pointed out the scalpel is his instrument during surgery.

"And in the same way, I see myself as an instrument in the hand of God. So I'm the one doing the operation, but He's the one guiding me."

He said he likes to pray with his patients.

"It shows them that I don't think I'm sitting in the place of God; it shows them that I see that I'm just an instrument in His hand," he said.

When folks are facing medical emergencies, some people would say that's exactly the wrong time to pressure them about spiritual matters. But most patients say it actually takes

much of the pressure off to bring God and prayer into their situations, and they appreciate it.

A Lethal Condition

Dallas resident Tom Pryor came to Pool's Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital with an emergency need to have an aortic valve replaced.

"His risk of dying was probably 90 percent if he had no surgery," Pool said of Pryor's condition. "Even if you do a surgery, the risk of dying is about 30 percent. So it's a highly lethal condition."

Pryor had just finished calls with his three children, sobered by the fact they might never hear from him again, when Pool offered to pray.

"I was slightly taken aback for just a second," Pryor said. "And, then, realizing my condition and the things that were going on, I thought it was probably a pretty good idea."

Pryor acknowledged the immediate impact of Pool's prayer. He said he felt much more calm and relaxed.

He believes God did an even bigger thing by answering Pool's prayer asking God that Pryor would live through the surgery.

"I am here. I beat the odds," he said.

Overstepping Boundaries?

Another praying doctor, gastrointestinal surgeon Rohan Jeyarajah at the Methodist Dallas Medical Center, said he understands a doctor asking to pray with patients could make some of them uncomfortable.

He said some might even think they dare not refuse this person who has so much power over their life and health.

"To some degree it can be like a teacher and a student,"

Jeyarajah stated. "And you have to make sure that you're not overstepping your boundaries there or being inappropriate in that relationship."

"The critics would say, 'Well, there's a power differential. You're this powerful doctor. This poor patient is there helpless and they feel like if they say no, you might not do your best during the surgery or something like that," Pool also pointed out.

"I think it's important to be sensitive to the fact that there are patients, number one, who may not be Christian," Jeyarajah added. "And, number two, there are patients who may not believe in God at all."

Still, Jeyarajah said he's witnessed God do so much at his hospital, he can't help but believe and pray.

'Every Day is Going to Church'

"I see the hand of God every day. I always say that with the work that I do, it's almost like every day is going to church," Jeyarajah testified.

Pool has also seen miracles. He recalled a patient whose heart just suddenly stopped in the intensive care unit.

"I opened his chest up and I was squeezing his heart," Pool remembered.

"Nothing was happening and I prayed, 'Lord, save this man.' We kept working and within a few minutes, his heart just started to beat. And there was nothing I had done differently to it. It just started up. And so his life was saved," he said.

But not everyone wants contact with this spiritual world Pool knows is real.

"I have had one patient who turned me down," he recalled. "I was there about to start the surgery and I said, 'You mind if

I say a prayer with you?' He said, 'I prefer not.' I will mention that his wife caught me right after that and said, 'If it had been me, I'd have let you pray for me!'"

Still, both Pool and Jeyarajah's spiritual intercessions get almost 100 percent support from their patients.

"Oftentimes they'll say 'That prayer meant the world to us,'" Pool stated.

That's how Russell Truett, from Rockwall, Texas, felt after he had a heart attack, but stalled and suffered about three weeks before finally going to the hospital.

Pool did a double bypass on Truett's heart, accompanied by plenty of prayers before and after.

"It was a huge relief," Truett said about Pool's frequent desire to pray with him.

"Being a Christian myself, whenever he asked that, it just took a world of pressure off my chest. And not only that he believed in it, but that he would offer to do it," he added.

Beyond the Hospital

Pool doesn't restrict his prayers just to medical matters. He found out from Truett that he was divorced from his wife about a year-and-a-half before.

"I was still in love with my wife. And I had pursued her for that year and a half, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me; quit talking to me," Truett said.

Pool prayed for reconciliation. Then Truett's wife called him in his hospital room.

"She asked if I felt like company and I said yeah. She came up that night and stayed the rest of the night in the hospital with me and has not left my side since," Truett recalled.

Another Rockwall resident, 78-year-old Jimmy Mayfield, needed an aortic valve replaced.

"It makes me feel better to know that the guy who's going to make the decisions when he gets in there has the Lord with him and has that peace," Mayfield said from his hospital gurney.

In Mayfield's hospital room, Pool took his hand.

"Father, I ask for strength for his heart, that you would protect it," the surgeon prayed.

"We know about Your love because You sent Your Son. We know about Your power because You raised Him from the dead. Father, I ask that You would work in a special way with Your love and power in Mr. Mayfield's life."

Prayers Without Ceasing

Jeyarajah knows some people declare they wouldn't want these kinds of prayers said over them. But he said they are probably people who haven't faced a killer disease yet.

"At the moment that you find out that you've got some horrible disease—cancer, whatever—I don't care what you believe in, if you don't actively believe in God, well, you believe in God at that moment," the surgeon said, having had years of dealing with patients facing life-or-death situations.

Pool's patient Truett encourages other doctors to consider following the example set by Pool and Jeyarajah to pray with their patients.

"I think they would be surprised how many of their patients would appreciate it if they would do it," Truett said.

"First Thessalonians says 'Pray without ceasing.' And that definitely means pray before you go and operate," Pool mentioned.

These are doctors humble enough to say they're not the Great Physician, but smart enough to know it's only wisdom making sure they bring Him into their surgeries.

Jeyarajah remembered one surgery that was going poorly.

"We got into some really big bleeding. And I put my finger on the bleeding and I looked up and I just said a little prayer. And the resident observing said to me, 'What do you think you're doing—are you praying or something?'" the doctor said. "And I said, 'Actually, I am.'"

Pool loves the Lord so much, he almost sacrificed his dream of being a doctor to become a pastor. But he said God showed him He has him just where He wants him.

"In what I'm doing for my patients and in ministering to them, that's my ministry. And I see now that the highest form of ministry is not necessarily full-time Christian ministry at a church. It's just the ministry that God has for you," Pool said. "And so that's what I've found: God's given me a ministry even as a heart surgeon."

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