

LETTERS

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Note to authors of letters: Please note that all letters submitted for publication should be typed with *double spacing*. Failure to comply with this may lead to delay in publication.

Divine healing

Sir,

I was much impressed by the editorial Diving healing: the Christian view (January *Journal*, p.3). As a follower of one of the main monotheistic religions, Islam, it was encouraging to note that in the past divine healing has made an important contribution to general practice and, in particular, to 'whole person' medicine. The practitioners of alternative therapy from the Third World, particularly the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, have been practising whole person medicine for a long time and records show that divine healing plays an important part in treating multitudes of people in the Third World where science has not yet made its impact.

I am pleased to note that the College is taking an interest in this field in conjunction with the Churches Council for Health and Healing. However, it should not be forgotten that too much emphasis on the practice of alternative medicine may unconsciously encourage the growth of quackery.

The application of spiritual healing is more obviously useful in the field of psychiatric illness. I have been involved with the listening clinics since 1980 and am convinced of the beneficial effects of spiritual healing which is not too remote from the application of modern principles of scientific treatment and plays the role of 'a helping person who listens to patients' complaints and offers a procedure to relieve them thereby inspiring the patient's hopes and combating demoralisation'.¹

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References

1. Shepherd M. What price psychotherapy? *Br Med J* 1984; **288**: 809-810.

Sir,

Divine healing is not a form of alternative therapy. Health and healing is not secular in the sense of being only of this age (Latin *saeculum*) but our field of work has tended to relegate the things which deeply bind society and general practitioners only advise patients on matters to do with their physical, psychological and social well being. Where have we gone wrong?

Let us hope that the working party set up by the College and the Churches Council for Health and Healing realizes that regular monthly services at a shrine are one way of expressing the ineffable: that to worship and adore the true and living God who created all things (including health and healing of all kinds) is central. Such services are not an alternative to our work but complementary to it. There is no professional rivalry between clergymen who conduct the services and general practitioners who are responsible for the health of those attending.

It is disturbing to read at the end of Dr Martin's editorial (January *Journal*, p.3) that this working party does not think that at present patient care is in the spiritual sphere as well as the temporal. The Churches Council for Health and Healing is aware that patient care is in both spheres — does the profession need to learn it too?

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Sir,

I wish to comment on Dr Edwin Martin's interesting editorial (January *Journal*, p.3). In the last paragraph it is suggested

that 'general practitioners may come to consider a patient's health in physical, psychological, social and spiritual terms' and a working party between the College and the Churches Council for Health and Healing 'is considering the effects of extending patient care into the spiritual sphere and ways of encouraging this extension'.

I am assuming that this possible extension might, in due course, be recommended to the College Council. If so, it seems important that the Council should consider the matter carefully before altering the familiar trinity which was itself considered carefully. Two questions have to be asked. First, does the suggested fourth word 'spiritual' add something of importance which is not already to be found in the other three? Secondly, if it were added, what might be the consequences for medical practice?

One has to ask what 'spiritual' means, to see if it has a meaning which differs, for example, from 'psychological'. *The shorter Oxford dictionary* gives a range of meanings: immaterial (that is, not physical), pertaining to the higher moral qualities (especially regarded in a religious aspect), sacred (not carnal or temporal), supernatural, ecclesiastical and intellectual. 'Psychological' is defined by the same dictionary to mean: mental: pertaining to the mind and relating to psychology.

There is therefore both difference and overlap in meaning. If one looks into the roots from which these two words are derived in Latin, Greek or Hebrew (for example 'pneuma' and 'psyche'), the overlap is much greater and the difference much less.

Of the six different meanings of 'spiritual', immaterial and intellectual can be included in the meaning of 'psychological'; supernatural and ecclesiastical cannot. Can the meanings sacred or moral be found in the trinity?