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Study: Physicians show little empathy

By Rita Rubin
USA TODAY

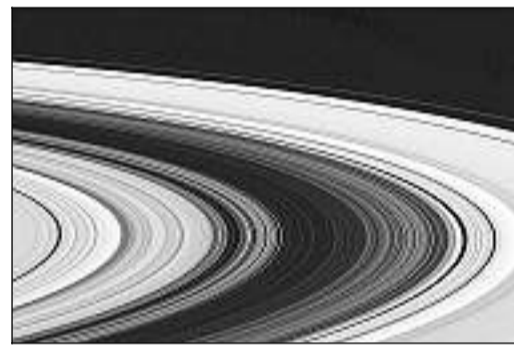
Doctors might be superb at diagnosing and treating diseases, but they could use a lesson or two about how to care for their patients' psyches, a study suggests. It found that cancer specialists and surgeons rarely responded with empathy to patients' concerns.

Researchers assessed transcripts of 20 audio recordings of consultations between men with lung cancer and surgeons or oncologists at a Veterans Affairs hospital. The transcripts revealed 384 opportunities for the doctors to show empathy — patient comments such as “this is overwhelming” and “I’m fighting it” — but they missed all but 39, researchers write in Tuesday’s *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

“They really responded more to the concrete patient concerns and not so much to their existential fears about living and dying,” says lead author Diane Morse, assistant professor of psychiatry and of medicine at the University of Rochester in New York. “I think doctors themselves can feel vulnerable about the issue of death and dying. It is a scary subject, especially if it’s someone who has cancer and is close to their own age.”

Previous studies have shown that patients whose doctors show empathy are more satisfied with their medical encounters, which leads to a better understanding of their condition and lower anxiety, Morse and her co-authors write.

“All people go to medical school because they want to help people,” Morse says. Sometimes, she says, a simple “I know that this is really scary” can go a long way in making patients feel better.



How old? Rings may be billions of years old.

Age, size of Saturn's rings reconsidered

The rings of Saturn may be much older than previously thought, according to research being presented today at the European Planetary Science Congress in Muenster, Germany. The suspicion that the rings are billions of years old comes from observations by the orbiting Cassini spacecraft and theoretical calculations. Larry Esposito of the University of Colorado, a member of the Cassini team, says the findings suggest that it might be common for other planets, those orbiting distant stars, to have such rings. Because the rings appear so clean and bright, it was thought that they were much younger than Saturn, which is 4.5 billion years old. But the new calculations indicate they could be a lot older than they look.

Less radiation for breast cancers?

Some women with early breast cancer may safely condense radiation therapy from five weeks to three, says a study presented Monday at the American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology in Boston. Women who have lumpectomies typically get five weeks of radiation to kill any cancer cells that remain after surgery. Shorter treatments, however, are less expensive and more convenient. In this trial, doctors randomly assigned 1,234 women to get either three or five weeks of radiation to the affected breast. After 10 years, 6% to 7% had relapses in both groups. These results are similar to those of a British study presented last year. Some patients may not be eligible and are advised to talk to their doctors. — *Liz Szabo*

Genetic link:

Jenna Stoller, a freshman at Cornell University, tested positive for a gene that puts her at a higher risk for breast and ovarian cancer.



By Kevin Rivoli, AP

Pondering cancer gene tests for kids

Women are going for breast cancer gene testing in record numbers, forcing more parents to face a tough question: Should we test the kids? Medical experts say little can be done to prevent or screen for breast or ovarian cancer before age 25, so the knowledge would only cause needless worry. But many people who have BRCA gene mutations, which increase the risk of some cancers, disagree. “I’m more comfortable knowing something about myself than not knowing,” said Cornell University freshman Jenna Stoller, who tested positive earlier this year, shortly after her 18th birthday. Research shows there can be benefits to at least talking about testing and inherited cancer risks with teens. It led some to quit smoking, one study found. Myriad Genetics, based in Salt Lake City, sells the only BRCA gene test, which costs up to \$3,000.

From staff and wire reports
E-mail betterlife@usatoday.com

David Wolpe looks into his questioning heart to explain why faith ultimately matters



By Bob Riha Jr., USA TODAY

Reason to believe: Rabbi David Wolpe has written *Why Faith Matters* in response to recent best sellers by atheists and the rise of religious fanaticism.

An L.A. rabbi takes on atheists and fanatics alike

By Cathy Lynn Grossman
USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Who loves questions more than Rabbi David Wolpe?

That’s a trick question. Wolpe has incontestable faith in questioning — about science, history, evil, tragedy, mystery, and most of all about God. They are “all questions that could open doors,” he writes in his new book, *Why Faith Matters*.

And if “some questions had answers beyond what I could know,” that would be all right with Wolpe, 50. He has encountered much of the tragedy and the mystery.

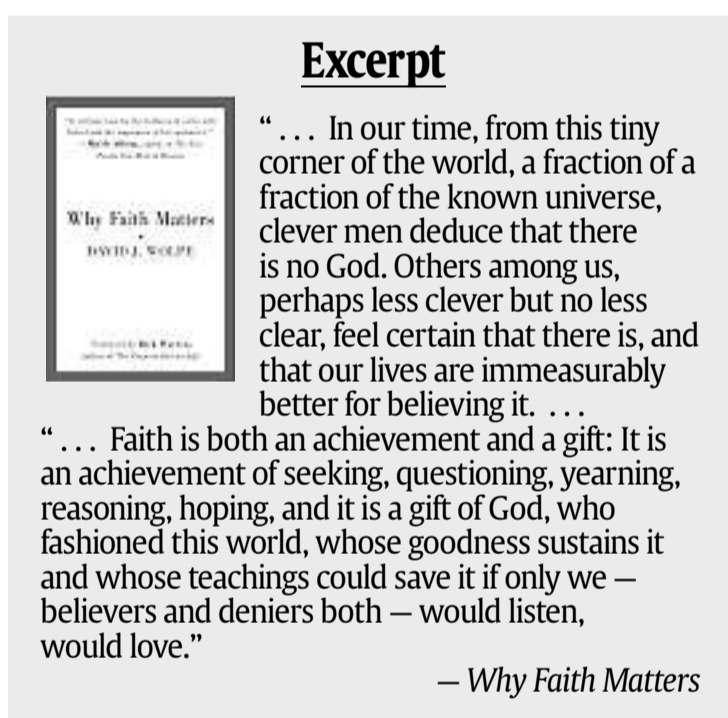
He has seen his mother struggle for 30 years with a stroke that left her unable to speak. His wife survived a rare cancer after the birth of their daughter. Then Wolpe developed a brain tumor. Four years after the tumor was removed, he was stricken with an unrelated, incurable form of lymphoma, which is now in remission.

In the past 11 years he has become a nationally known leader of Sinai Temple in Beverly Hills, a Conservative synagogue with 2,100 families. He has taught on theology and religion and science at the University of California-Los Angeles and studied Torah weekly with Kirk Douglas.

Before Sinai, he taught and wrote six other books, including a succinct handbook, *Why Be Jewish?*

But he says that as he lay sidelined by chemotherapy, a question emerged: “Wow, I’m facing mortality. Is there something more I really want to say?”

Why Faith Matters is his answer. It addresses two great threats that have troubled him in recent years. The first is that the only choices on religion appeared to be cold denial or flaming fanaticism.



Excerpt

“... In our time, from this tiny corner of the world, a fraction of a fraction of the known universe, clever men deduce that there is no God. Others among us, perhaps less clever but no less clear, feel certain that there is, and that our lives are immeasurably better for believing it. . . .

“... Faith is both an achievement and a gift: It is an achievement of seeking, questioning, yearning, reasoning, hoping, and it is a gift of God, who fashioned this world, whose goodness sustains it and whose teachings could save it if only we — believers and deniers both — would listen, would love.”

— *Why Faith Matters*

He was “infuriated” by a wave of best-selling books by atheists, including Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, all glibly sure that God does not exist and that faith is for fools, he says.

“What’s so appalling is the idea that there is no mystery that won’t yet be solved. That if we don’t know it all yet, we will,” Wolpe says.

The other is the threat of violent religious fundamentalism that turns belief into a scourge, he says.

“The tremendous good that is done by faith in this world is sometimes overlooked or belittled. But most of those who are able to stand up to tyranny and hatred feel that they do so because they are empowered by a force beyond themselves,” he writes.

He wanted to offer what he has

seen of faith as a rabbi who steps into “the privilege of every important moment” in people’s lives.

“Faith is all about relationships: It’s 85% of the day-to-day of life. Proving the Bible is not my point,” he says. “To have questions is not the opposite of faith. Questions assume faith. They assume there is a God to ask ‘Why?’”

Wolpe points out that the Bible is packed with great questions from the very first, when Adam and Eve are cowering in shame and God asks, “Where are you?”

Faith, he says, is how you answer, “Where am I?”

You triangulate, he says. You find your place “in relation to other people, to your soul and to the world. You can’t find yourself alone because faith is not in solitude. It re-

quires others. It requires you to think that your soul matters. And it is worthless if it doesn’t help you make God’s world better.”

In Wolpe’s book, of course, that does not require Jesus, although he cites Christians as well as Jews who have found in faith the ability to “grow in soul, to achieve goodness, to work for causes larger than existence alone.”

His vision of prayer is “you, leaping up. It is the constant possibility you can experience God’s presence. To feel God powerfully, always open and available to those who open themselves to him.”

And what was Wolpe’s own prayer, through the brain surgery, through cancer treatment?

“God, stay close,” he says.

The book comes with a forward by evangelical powerhouse Rick Warren, pastor and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. He calls Wolpe “a great soul, a brilliant thinker, and a captivating writer.”

Warren says he wrote the foreword because, “although the book is not about Jesus, Christian believers can learn a lot from this candid account,” just as some Jews tell him they did from Warren’s book.

This fall Wolpe will take on the atheist arguments, debating Christopher Hitchens in New York in October and California in November.

Why Faith Matters is timed to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which begins at sunset Monday. The holiday ushers in the 10 Days of Awe, the period when Jews examine the past year and pray for a good year to come, leading to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The hardest question of these holidays is not, “How can I be better than last year?” says Wolpe, but rather, “What will I be like six months from now?”

Dietary supplements cause 600 ‘adverse events’

First data since reporting law

By A.J. Perez
USA TODAY

Serious side effects from the use of food supplements resulted in 604 “adverse-event” reports — a list that includes at least five deaths — through the first six months that such accounts have been required by law.

The Office of Nutritional Products, Labeling and Dietary Supplements in the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition acknowledged receiving 368 mandatory reports from supplement manufacturers and 236 reports from consumers or health care professionals.

An adverse event can be anything from a concern that a supplement isn’t working to a serious illness that follows consumption. FDA spokesman Michael Herndon said five deaths and 85 hospitalizations were reported through April 15, the most current numbers available. “Some of these deaths were likely due to underlying medical conditions,” he says.

The FDA did not identify the supplements linked to the adverse events. The agency defines dietary supplements as including vitamins, minerals, amino acids, herbs or botanicals, and enzyme supplements.

Dietary supplements have long been a controversial topic, with consumer advocates critical of the fact that, unlike with drugs, supplement makers don’t have to prove their

Top-selling supplements

1. Multivitamins
2. Sports nutrition powders/formulas
3. Calcium
4. B vitamins
5. Vitamin C
6. Glucosamine/chondroitin
7. Homeopathics
8. Other vitamins
9. Fish/animal oils
10. Coenzyme Q10

Source: Nutrition Business Journal 2007 survey

products are safe or effective before they reach the market. Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., sponsored legislation in 2006 to require supplement manufacturers to inform the FDA when there are adverse events. The bill took effect Jan. 1.

“Five years ago, the dietary

supplement industry claimed that they had no reports of health problems — zero — related to their products,” Durbin said in an e-mail.

“Thanks in part to our legislation, we today know there are hundreds of serious problems each year, many involving hospitalization and death,” he says.

If the trend continues, there will be fewer than the 960 adverse-event reports the FDA had estimated it would receive each year.

“These numbers don’t alarm us,” says Steve Mister, president and chief executive of the supplement trade group Council for Responsible Nutrition. “We thought they would be much less than the FDA estimate.”

The legislation pushed by Durbin came in the wake of several deaths related to the

now-banned supplement ephedra. The weight-loss and energy enhancer was implicated in the deaths of Minnesota Vikings offensive lineman Corey Stringer in 2001 and Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler in 2003.

“There’s still no assurance that supplements are safe,” says Peter Lurie, deputy director of Public Citizen’s Health Research Group. “Many people are under the impression that the FDA has approved supplements, but that’s not the case. There’s really no assurance that what manufacturers say is in the product is really in there.”

Adverse-event reporting has been required for prescription and some non-prescription drugs for years. The FDA took in 482,154 adverse-event reports for prescription drugs last year.