

## HOLISTIC HEALTH

# Have we faith in our healers?

CAROL RYAN

Despite little scientific evidence that faith healing helps cure illnesses, some people find it works where conventional medicine fails

**T**HE SHIFT in Irish people's attitudes to religion in recent years has been dramatic. At the same time, society has become more rational. Superstitions are dying out and there are fewer tales of statues crying tears of blood or banshees wailing in the night. But even in this sceptical age, do Irish people still believe in miracles when their health is in danger?

Faith healers have been around since antiquity and generations of Irish people believed that certain people have God-given gifts to cure disease.

Aidan Wrynn is a "seventh son" healer based in Leitrim. According to old Irish folklore, the seventh son of a seventh son has special healing powers (the American Indians hold the same belief). Even in pre-contraception Ireland when couples churned out huge families, "seventh sons" were a freak occurrence and people flocked to them for cures.

Wrynn says that significant numbers of Irish people of all ages are still going

to faith healers. "There is demand for what I do... it varies depending on how many clinics you do, but I would probably see eight people on a daily basis."

He recommends a course of three treatments and charges €20 for a consultation in his home or €30 for a call out.

People come to him with everything from minor aches and pains to serious illnesses.

"I see a lot of people these days suffering from anxiety and depression because of the nature of society at the moment. The most common problem with younger children is digestive imbalances. Colic is up dramatically."

He says that faith healers are not the first port of call, but a last option for people who have exhausted conventional treatment.

About 10 per cent of the people he deals with have a life-threatening or terminal illness.

"With anyone who is diagnosed with a terminal illness, the first most obvious thing is that you don't make a promise that you can't keep. I shudder to say anything about success rates with cancer or terminal illness because it can give the wrong impression."

"I also see people who are having radio- or chemotherapy and they come primarily to get through the treatment in as comfortable a way as possible."

He has noticed that belief in faith healers is stronger in certain areas. "The east of the country has less understanding of it and they probably haven't been exposed to healing as much as the west of Ireland. There are

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Aidan Wrynn: a "seventh son" healer based in Leitrim. Photographs: Willie Farrell

areas like south Armagh that are highly responsive to healers and have a great trust in it. Rural areas in general tend to be more permanent in their belief structures."

Dublin-based Finbarr Nolan was one of Ireland's most famous faith healers before he retired. While thousands of people came to him for cures during his heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, he noticed a dramatic fall-off in numbers seeking faith healing in recent years. He puts this down to the decline of religion rather than any urban/rural divide.

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people have become more sceptical... they think it is a con job." Certainly a major concern about faith healing is that people desperate for a cure are easily preyed upon. The multi-million dollar faith healing "industry" in the US is booming and

thought to be rife with fraud.

During the 1980s, investigator James Randi exposed a famous American healer, Peter Popoff, as a con artist who made millions of dollars selling cures to the sick.

His party piece was to stun members of his audiences by giving them personal details - perhaps their home address or specific details about their illnesses - claiming he was receiving the information from God.

However, it was not God, but his wife who was feeding him this information through an ear piece.

Faith healers have been credited with miraculous cures, but their powers are usually dismissed by scientists

as a myth. So far, there is little hard evidence from clinical trials that faith healing actually works.

Cures are hard to verify because the evidence is anecdotal and there are no before and after medical reports kept. Sceptics claim miracle cures can be explained by spontaneous remissions or a placebo effect.

Edzard Ernst conducted hundreds of studies on alternative therapies during his time as professor of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter in England.

While he says faith healing can alleviate stress, his research suggests it causes nothing more than a placebo effect.

In one of his studies, 110 chronic pain patients were given eight treatments by either a faith healer or a trained actor.

The reduction in symptoms was remarkable, but the trained actors got results which were just as good as those achieved by the healers, suggesting that there is a placebo effect at play.

Research also shows that people with strong belief in faith healers are less likely to take prescribed medicine

and more likely to express dissatisfaction with their GP.

Placebo effect or not, faith healers do appear to have satisfied customers who found relief where conventional medicine failed. Those who believe in it argue that scientific thinking is too linear and too limited to explain what is going on with faith healing.

If science can't explain it, how do faith healers understand their gift?

"My hands feel hot [during a healing]... my interpretation is that it is the transfer of healing energy, which enhances the immune system in the body which gives the person a chance to recover," says Wrynn.

Finbarr Nolan also spoke of having a healing energy that some people respond to while others do not.

All of this sounds very like popular alternative therapies such as reiki or plexus-bio healing, which claim to heal by correcting "energy imbalances" in the body.

Is this more or less the same "healing energy" used in faith healing, but stripped of the religion for our new secular tastes?