

Spirituality and health: past and future of a controversial and challenging relationship

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Since ancient times, spiritual beliefs, practices and experiences have been one of the most influential and prevalent components of most societies. Health providers, researchers and the general population have increasingly recognized the importance of the religious/spiritual dimension to health. The number of studies investigating the relationship of spirituality and health has increased exponentially. However, there are two major shortcomings in this field in relation to Brazil and other Portuguese speaking countries. One is that studies done on spirituality and health in these countries are not well known abroad. The second limitation is the lack of a comprehensive review of the literature on spirituality and health that is easily accessible to researchers and clinicians of these countries.

To our knowledge, this is the first medical journal in Portuguese to devote an entire issue to spirituality and health. It is our hope that this special issue will address those two shortcomings described above. *Revista de Psiquiatria Clinica* is a peer-reviewed journal founded in 1972 and published every two months by the Department of Psychiatry of the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. It has free on-line access at www.hcnet.usp.br/ipq/revista, which makes the papers published here easily accessible.

We attempted to make this special issue on spirituality and health as comprehensive and interdisciplinary as possible. In addition to providing an overview of the current mainstream research done in the field, it includes several papers on relevant but still understudied topics on spirituality and health, to which Brazilian researchers could make a special and unique contribution, that were especially emphasized. Some of these topics are trance and possession states as well as spiritually-based clinical interventions. To fulfill this goal, we are honored to have included papers from several of the main spirituality and health research leaders in Brazil, United States, and United Kingdom. We would like to express our gratitude to all authors and reviewers that collaborated on this issue and the translators that translated into Portuguese the original English manuscripts. Specially, we would like to thank Professor Wagner Gattaz, editor of *Revista de Psiquiatria Clinica*. We have been deeply honored and challenged by Gattaz's invitation to be the guest editors of the special thematic issue on spirituality and health.

Dr. Harold Koenig opens this issue with a foreword stating the relevance of the field and the potential and current contribution of Brazilian researchers. The first papers address epistemological, methodological and historical aspects of investigations related to spiritual experiences, mainly experiences connected to worldwide foundations of spirituality: Shamanism and altered states of consciousness. We would like to highlight Stanley Krippner's paper on studies of Shamanism. The main purpose of these opening papers is to provide some groundwork and guidelines for future research in these highly controversial subjects.

After the theoretical papers, there are five articles presenting the latest evidence related to the relationship of religion/spirituality to clinical issues, such as drug use, pain palliative care, physical health, psychosis, and quality of life. These works are followed by Bruce Greyson's paper on Near Death Experiences, its clinical and theoretical implications to the mind-brain relationship and the study of consciousness.

The other four articles deal with a very important, but little explored aspect of spirituality and health: spiritually-based clinical interventions. This kind of research involves several critical, ethical and methodological issues. Leao & Lotufo Neto, and Elias et al., provide us with results of their creative and innovative clinical trials. These research designs are very promising and it is worthwhile to continue to build upon their research to further advance the field and methodology.

We finish our special issue with Ian Stevenson's autobiography, one of the most respected and important researchers on several spiritual experiences. After receiving his manuscript, we were very sorry to know that Stevenson passed away this year, in February. We hope the publication of his autobiography in this issue may be a small tribute to his entire life devoted to explore the most controversial subjects using the most rigorous and stringent scientific approach.

Studying scientifically spirituality is a very exciting although somewhat precarious enterprise. This is a field filled with prejudices, biases for and against spirituality. Many people have opinions to give, but usually these judgments

are not based on an in-depth analysis of the evidence available. It is easy to slip into an intolerant and Pyrrhonian skepticism or to give a naive acceptance of doubtful claims. Regardless of whether we hold spiritual or materialistic beliefs, religious or anti-religious postures or not, we have a responsibility to explore the relationship between spirituality and health in order to improve our knowledge and our care for human beings. Through this challenging task, it would be useful to keep in mind the following words of Karl Popper, one of the most important philosophers of the 20th Century:

“In searching for the truth, it may be our best plan to start by criticizing our most cherished beliefs.(...) (p.6)

I believe that it would be worth trying to learn something about the world even if in trying to do so we should merely learn that we do not know much. This state of learned ignorance might be a help in many of our troubles. It might be well for all of us to remember that, while differing widely in the various little bits we know, in our infinite ignorance, we are all equal.” (p.29)¹

¹ Popper, K. R. (1995) *Conjectures and Refutations – The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge).