

# MEDICINE & Spirituality

## Transcendental Meditation: *Any Effects on Health?*

By John Campbell, PhD, Director of Research, Oklahoma Health Center Clinical Pastoral Education Institute, Inc. © 2006

IntelliHealth, sponsored by Harvard Medical School as a Consumer Health Information service, reported on June 13, 2006, about an article co-authored by **Dr. Noel Bairey Merz of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center** that appeared in the June issue of **Archives of Internal Medicine**.

The article reported the study of 103 **heart disease patients**, a segment of which **practiced transcendental meditation (TM)** for four months. All the patients received regular medical care, including drugs for lowering cholesterol and blood pressure.

At the end of the study, **those in the group practicing TM showed slight improvements in blood pressure and insulin levels**. The author hailed the study as the first to show an effect on insulin function, but also admitted the study was designed to measure cortisol levels in saliva, but the specimens were incorrectly stored and dried up. Nonetheless, **Dr. Merz speculated that meditation decreased the blood levels of the “fight or flight” hormone cortisol**. Interestingly, the glucose and insulin levels actually increased in the parallel group who simply continued with the health education program as opposed to meditating.

The meditation used in the study was **Transcendental Meditation**, introduced to the United States by **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** and continued by the representatives of the school he founded in Fairfield, Iowa, called the Maharishi University of Management. The process involves sitting quietly and focusing on a repeated sound, termed a mantra, for about 20 minutes each morning and evening.

Several **criticisms of the study** included the comments of **Jim Lane of the Duke University School of Medicine**, who pointed out the **potential conflict of interest raised in the study by having some of the researchers involved in the organization that charges \$2,500 to teach TM**. Dr. Merz countered by saying she did not practice TM and was not paid by the organization despite others on the research team being paid by the TM organization. On the subject of the data, the slight improvement was detailed as a mere **3 point decrease in the average systolic blood pressure** of the patients but **no change in the diastolic blood pressure**.

The **point could be made that**, since **the study really should be done over** based on both the potential bias and the loss of prime targeted data, could it also be **broadened to compare other meditation, or possibly other religious or spiritual interventions beyond TM**. A comparison of **outcomes for patients with intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity** would be informative. Intrinsic religiosity describes persons who live their faith daily and internalize their beliefs whereas extrinsic religiosity is practiced by persons who have other reasons for practicing a faith. **Would there be a difference in health outcome based on meditation directed toward a mantra as in TM or meditation directed toward a Higher Power?**

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