

Is religion a healthy habit?

Adopt the ascetic lifestyle of a monk
— you could find you live longer

In the past two months, the medical journals have contained several unusual papers on the effects, both positive and negative, of religious beliefs on health.

First, *The Lancet* carried a paper showing that Chinese-Americans were more likely to die in months indicated as significant by Chinese astrology, but only if they believed in the principles of astrology — Chinese non-believers were immune from this effect.

Last month, the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* carried a curious paper from researchers in Melbourne. People with strong religious beliefs had lower than expected rates of cancers of the rectum and colon, even taking into account such factors as smoking and drinking.

Perhaps the most intriguing was a paper in the current *American Journal of Epidemiology* reporting a study of the health of Dutch monks belonging to the Benedictine and Trappist orders.

The Benedictine order

began in the sixth century when Benedict founded the Abbey at Monte Cassino. His regime of piety, discipline, work and contemplation was an oasis of calm in a Europe entering the Dark Ages, and spread rapidly.

The Benedictine order has changed remarkably little in succeeding centuries, and still attracts adherents. As well as monks entering a life of spirituality, many lay men and women still go on short retreats to escape the pressures of modern secular life.

Medical researchers have been interested for some years in the health of religious groups such as monastic orders and fundamentalist Christians.

The reason is not so much what such groups do, but what they do not do. The Benedictines, for example, discourage smoking and drinking. Although their Trappist colleagues follow strict diets, they do not follow a rule of total silence, as many believe. They do discourage idle chatter.

Not surprisingly, studies of these and other religious orders have shown that an ascetic lifestyle is associated with longer life expectancies than those of the rest of the less abstemious population. For example, it is established that Mormons have lower than expected death rates from heart disease and cancer, as do



Benedictine monks: abstinence can be a blessing

Seventh Day Adventists and the Old Order Amish.

However, what is not clear is the quality of life in those additional years earned by abstaining from such lethal habits as smoking and drinking. This was the topic studied by researchers at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, who looked at 134 Dutch monks of the Benedictine and Trappist orders. The monks were, on average, 63 years old and had been in the order for 40 years. The researchers asked the monks about their general health, chronic illnesses and general disability.

The results were compared with data from the "normal" Dutch population of equiva-

lent age and education. Overall, the monks were as healthy as the non-religious "control" subjects. As predicted, they were less likely to suffer from heart disease and chronic bronchitis.

Surprisingly, they were more likely to experience migraine, severe headaches, arthritis, rheumatism and sinusitis. Furthermore, they were twice as likely to experience difficulties in completing tasks such as dressing, walking and climbing stairs.

The results brought to mind a joke first popularised by Clement Freud (although he blamed it on a "third rate comedian in Sloane Square") — "if you give up smoking,

drinking and sex, you don't live longer, it just seems longer". Well, not quite. You live longer, but at the cost of higher rates of disability.

These findings have a relevance beyond the monastic world. For some years, health promotion advocates have argued in favour of the "compression of morbidity". The idea is that health promotion

Monks are less susceptible to heart disease but more likely to get migraines and rheumatism

leads not only to increased longevity, but also to a better quality of life, summed up in the slogan "add life to your years, not just years to your life". This rather optimistic position is not supported by the Dutch findings.

However, the contemplative life still offered advantages. St Benedict's original rules for his order stated that "Before all things, and above all things, one must take care of the sick". The researchers noted that the monks looked after their old and sick colleagues with devotion. Old monks who, in other circumstances, would have been consigned to nursing homes or long-stay hospitals, continued to live in the monastery.

Benedict also wrote that "grumbling is the greatest sin". About 1,400 years later the researchers noted that even though the Benedictine monks had more physical problems than the average Hollander, they were less likely to complain, and more accepting of their disability.

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