

Stand up and be healed

Doctors think miracle cures are bogus. But **Simon Wessely** wonders if charismatic powers might not work where psychiatry has failed

Last week I went to the Earl's Court exhibition centre to hear Morris Cerullo, the American evangelist whose posters promising miraculous healing have been spread around London. Mr Cerullo modestly disclaimed any personal ability to perform miracles, stating instead that these were the work of the Lord.

Nevertheless, the theme of miracles dominated his four-hour performance, and, amid scenes of rising excitement, Mr Cerullo duly obliged. A woman announced as suffering from multiple sclerosis and heart disease appeared. She had been cured during the previous night's performance, and performed a credible Irish jig in proof.

Even more common is misunderstanding. In my clinical practice I see patients whose notes and letters state that they have been diagnosed as suffering from a variety of serious diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy or angina. On reading the file in detail one finds the diagnosis was often made many years ago by a busy junior doctor and never subsequently challenged. Sometimes there is an entry "Could be angina", or "?asthma?" in the notes. With the passage of time and the change of doctors, the query gets forgotten.

These patients may experience genuine symptoms such as chest pain or palpitations, the result not of chest or heart disease, but psychological disorders such as depression or



given over to drink and drug problems. The front of the stage filled up with cigarette packets discarded by members of the audience who then received Mr Cerullo's blessing, many of them falling over in an apparent trance. Then a pregnant woman who admitted to cocaine addiction was brought forward. As the 20,000 crowd chanted "Jesus, Jesus" Mr Cerullo attempted to cast out the evil spirit which inhabited her. As she was led off stage, he instructed his aides that she was not to leave the hall until she had begun to speak in tongues.

What had the audience witnessed? It is nothing new for charismatic preachers, and indeed charismatic doctors, to claim miracle cures. Although such claims are international, more seem to come out of the United States, with its tradition of the travelling medical show, than anywhere else.

The most common explanation for miraculous cures is that the person who was cured never had that particular disease in the first place. It is rare for sufferers to invent diseases to gain the attention that follows a miraculous cure. More common is misdiagnosis.

The interpretation of a shadow on a X-ray, or of cells under a microscope, is a matter of judgment. Mistakes are made.

like epilepsy, or multiple sclerosis is also psychological in origin.

Classic Freudian teaching calls this hysteria, which is said to occur when a patient represses intolerable psychological conflicts and distress, which are then converted into a loss of physical function — hence the modern term for hysteria, conversion disorder. Studies have shown that about 5 per cent of those attending an epilepsy clinic actually have similar psychiatric illnesses, and not epilepsy.

Mr Cerullo's miracles could thus have terrestrial explanations. Patients with psychologically-based loss of function are often suggestible, and may be influenced by the intense atmosphere generated at a charismatic meeting. The mixture of emotion, music and exhortation that I witnessed was awesome in its power. For others the improvement may only have been temporary. Patients with severe multiple sclerosis are often capable of movement for a short period — what is impossible is sustained activity. A recent article by Dr Peter May in the *Church of England Newspaper* analysed the alleged miracles claimed by Morris Cerullo, and concluded they were either short-lived, or had entirely adequate conventional explanations. A detailed

investigation by the BBC Programme *Heart of the Matter* also failed to find any evidence for miraculous healing.

Few doctors will be surprised by these findings. Previous claims of miraculous cures for dread diseases have never withstood critical scrutiny, and there was no reason to believe that Mr Cerullo's miracles would be any different.

Just like the vast majority of doctors, including those of strong religious faith, I find the business distasteful. It may also be damaging. Despite the no doubt legally inspired disclaimer in the programme for the Earl's Court show, some sufferers may abandon medical treatment in the erroneous belief that they have been cured. Others may have hopes raised, only to suffer the inevitable despair when the miracle fails to happen. If illness is the result of man's sins and is the devil's work, and can be cured by faith alone, as I heard Mr Cerullo claim, then those who are not cured might blame themselves for lack of faith, or believe that illness is their fault.

But as a psychiatrist, I have one niggling doubt. There are, indeed, some patients whom Mr Cerullo might be able to

cure. Modern neurology cannot cure those with hysterical symptoms, and years of psychiatric treatment does not always work. A condition which, like hysteria, depends upon an idea of illness, could respond to Mr Cerullo's exhortation. Charismatic healing might also work for another set of disorders. On the day I went to Earl's Court the theme was addiction. On the same day the *British Medical Journal* published a learned paper on stopping smoking. It pointed out that quitting smoking could be the result of an almost limitless number of factors — personal, social, financial, legal, psychological and so on. What about faith? Could that also help those like the pregnant woman addicted to cocaine at Morris Cerullo's meeting?

Even the most ardent supporter of psychiatric services for drug users would admit that therapy can be a difficult and frequently unrewarding struggle. One can imagine a psychiatrist confronting a particularly intractable and disturbed client saying, only half in jest, that only a miracle can help. Should we then send for Morris Cerullo?

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