

# Therapeutic Touch: The Imprimatur of Nursing

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*Research by the author showed that the laying-on of hands with the intent to heal raised hemoglobin levels in ill persons.*

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Therapeutic touch by the laying-on of hands looks absurdly simple but is profoundly complex. The act consists of the simple placing of the hands for about 10 to 15 minutes on or close to the body of an ill person by someone who intends to help or to heal that person. It is an ancient practice, recorded in the hieroglyphics, cuneiform writings, and pictographs of earliest literate cultures, and it persists to this day. However, it continues as it has been throughout the centuries: a little-understood enigma of a signally human interaction.

Touch is probably one of the most primitive sensations. Neurologically, touch and pain—two sensations one is very much involved with when helping ill people—are conducted by the central nervous system fibers that are myelinated earliest in the fetus. One of the first sensations that the newborn baby has, as he descends through the birth canal, is that of cutaneous stimulation. Developmental stages follow which derive their certainty from a whole series of

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touch experiences that evolve from the first gropings of hand-mouth exploration that tell us of our world, to the complexities of hand-eye coordinations by which we make the world our own. These functions, extending from the far reaches of time, are built into the very fiber of human development throughout life.

It is perhaps because touch is so primitive that it is so powerful a therapeutic tool. For instance, one can hardly imagine the most basic of nursing skills being performed without the act of touch. Indeed, touch is, so to speak, the imprimatur of nursing. Everyone, whether nurse or therapist, family member or friend, can look back on times when touch was extremely meaningful in a personal way. I have on file over 100 first-person accounts from nurses in this country and abroad which tell of the spontaneous use of touch quite unknowingly, or rather unknowledgeably, during acts of nursing intervention which brought therapeutic results so unusual that they frequently came as a surprise. It should be noted, however, that even the most renowned healers (and, I would suspect, nurses) do not claim greater than a 30 percent cure rate(1).

The therapeutic, comforting effects of touch are such common occurrences that most people become all but indifferent to them. Part of the reason for this may lie in the strong personal overlay that surrounds any act of touch, whose subjective nature understandably makes controlled study difficult. This limitation, together with the development of modern medical technologies, has been important in the progressive decline

throughout most of the twentieth century in the practice of healing by the laying-on of hands.

## **Early Studies**

In the early 1960's Bernard Grad, a Canadian biochemist, became interested in this phenomenon. With the cooperation of a renowned healer, Oskar Estebany, he conducted double-blind studies on mice and on barley seeds(2-4). In the former study, Grad selected 300 standardized mice and wounded them all in a specific manner. One third of the mice, used as a control group, were allowed to heal without outside intervention. Another 100 were treated by Estebany with the laying-on of hands. The remainder were held by medical students who did not profess to heal. After two weeks, healing in Estebany's group had accelerated to a degree that could have happened by chance less than once in a thousand times.

In the double-blind study on barley seeds, Grad soaked the seeds in saline solution to simulate a "sick" condition, and then divided them into groups, as in the experiment on mice. The first control group was watered by tap water, the second by water from flasks held by disinterested persons, and the third group (experimental group) was watered from flasks held by Estebany. The seeds which were watered with fluid from the flasks held by Estebany sprouted more quickly, grew taller, and had more chlorophyll than the seeds in the control groups.

In the late 1960's, another biochemist and enzymologist, Sr. M. Justa Smith, did further research on