OSU professor: Early Christians accepted medicine

By Nancy Haught, The Oregonian
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As an Oregon City couple stands trial next week in the faith-healing death of their daughter, a new book argues that early Christians used secular medicine and did not rely solely on prayer or divine intervention.

In "Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity" (Johns Hopkins University Press, 264 pages, $35), Gary B. Ferngren, who teaches ancient history at Oregon State University, focuses on the first five centuries of Christianity.

"There is a widespread view that Christians rejected secular medicine, and it simply is not true," he says. "Most Christians understood that disease was caused by natural processes, not demons." The early church offered medical care to its own members and extended it to non-Christians, believing that Jesus, "the good physician," asked it of his followers, Ferngren says.

Carl and Raylene Worthington are members of the Followers of Christ Church, a Pentecostal sect that shuns some medical treatment. Their daughter, 15-month-old Ava, died March 2, 2008, of bronchial pneumonia and a blood infection. A state medical examiner concluded that both conditions could have been treated with antibiotics.

Ferngren has written several articles and books on the social history of medicine during his 39 years on the OSU faculty. In an interview, he talked about his research and findings. His answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: How do you research such a topic?

A: I study the status of doctors in ancient society, the kinds of healing they offered, what their patients sought in medical care, the environmental background of medicine. I read the New Testament, looking for biblical evidence for health and healing, and then I went to the church fathers, Christian intellectuals who began to defend Christianity in the second century.

Q: What did you find?

A: It has been argued that early Christians believed disease was caused by demons and that they employed religious healing and exorcism as the standard means of treating disease. I haven't found much evidence for that. Christians were no different from the Greeks and the Romans. They used the methods of healing that their neighbors used. They accepted a naturalistic cause of disease. They employed medicine because of its
cultural authority.

Q: What do you mean by "cultural authority"?

A: Greeks had a deep interest in medicine. It was regarded as something that an educated person should know about. In the Greek and Roman view, healing was an art -- a benign art. Ancient literature depicted the physician as a person of compassion who brought relief from suffering. The good physician became a metaphor for the good judge, the good legislator and the like.

Early Christians took over the metaphor of the good physician and applied it to Jesus as early as the second century. He was described as the healer of sin-sick souls.

Q: Did all Christians accept secular medicine?

A: In the second century, Origen wrote that most Christians would use physicians but that those who wanted to rely on God alone should seek healing by prayer and spiritual means. There have always been some Christians who did that.

Q: What did medicine look like in those early centuries?

A: The body had to be treated in a holistic fashion, based on the idea of prognosis -- that a physician could determine the course of a disease. A doctor would prescribe a regimen: diet, sleep, baths, rest, clean air, water that was pure. It sounds naturopathic today. The germ theory of disease was unknown. Most physicians didn't know a lot about internal organs. But the Romans developed surgery; they were especially good at removing cataracts. They could remove kidney stones very effectively. There was much that a physician could not do, and physicians realized that. Hence, they refused to treat diseases that they could not help.

Q: Did Christians contribute anything to the Greek and Roman ideas about medical care?

A: Their real contribution was to the origin of medical philanthropy. Early Christians practiced private charity to the poor and to those who were physically in need. Part of this was taking care of members who were ill. The model they often used was the good Samaritan, which fit in with the iconography of Jesus as the good physician, the healer of souls. The idea was to offer assistance to those in need, not in supernatural terms but by relieving suffering.

In the third century, during time of plague, Christians reached out to non-Christians. Operating through church deacons and deaconesses, Christians had been offering palliative care and support to their own members for three centuries before they founded the first hospitals at the end of the fourth century. They saw compassion as essential to medical care and a basic component of the gospel.

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