

Book Review

Spirituality and Health Research: Methods, Measurement, Statistics and Resources

By Harold G Koenig

West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press 2011

Professor Andrew Sims

Sometimes, towards the end of a particularly dramatic wildlife programme on television, we are beguiled and amazed for a short time by being shown how the filming was carried out. *Spirituality and Health Research* is that kind of book. For ten years we have had the same author's *Handbook of Religion and Health*, a massive and authoritative work linking religious belief to health outcome, and we are awaiting the second edition which contains much new evidence with the same conclusions. This, shorter but still comprehensive book, is the detailed account of how such information can be collected, analysed and interpreted: Methods, Measurement, Statistics and Resources. Now that *Spirituality and Health Research* has appeared no serious researcher in spirituality and health will be able to ignore it; even though they may not like its conclusions, they will have to know what it says. One only wishes that it had been available to some who embarrassed themselves previously by embarking on inconclusive work with inadequate methodology. Harold Koenig has once again applied his intellect and massive thoroughness to publish, based on a 5-day taught research workshop, a complete handbook on **how to** conduct spirituality and health research; the product is invaluable.

The need for carrying out this sort of research can hardly be overstated. In Koenig's words: 'There are practical reasons that research in this area is so important, is likely to have a high payoff in the years ahead, and is worth the investment by government and private funding agencies. People...around the world...living longer has created a real quandary for government-funded health programs...Given the role that religion/spirituality could play in preventing illness, speeding recovery, and motivating individuals to care for one another in the community...research in this area will be of critical importance in addressing the escalating health-care costs...around the world.'

There are five parts to this research manual: Overview; Methods and Design; Measurement; Statistical Analyses and Modelling; and, Publishing and Funding Resources. Koenig both does his research, and describes how to do it, like a builder erecting a house in a hurricane zone: everything is thought through and meticulously planned, nothing is left to chance, there are no loose ends flapping.

The Overview describes the current state of the research studying the effects of religion and spirituality (R/S) on health outcomes. There has been substantially more work in the ten years since publication of the *Handbook of Religion and Health* in

2001, but the overall conclusions remain the same – R/S has a beneficial effect upon health. There have been many more studies; more is known about other countries and cultures, e.g. R/S has an even greater benefit to health in developing countries where material resources tend to be less. In general, the greater was the rigour in conducting the study, the more likely is there to be demonstrated a positive effect of R/S upon health. Studies show increasing complexity and sophistication and are asking more incisive questions. There is an interesting chapter on ‘Strengths, Weaknesses and Challenges’ of R/S and health research. Some of the criticisms of this research have been exaggerated, for example, it is accepted that all researchers in all areas of research, not just in R/S and health research, have biases, and the design must acknowledge and take account of this. The ‘challenges’ are lack of funding, lack of trained investigators and lack of sustained research. There are suggestions on how research could develop in the future with ideas for physical and mental health research, the use of health services and clinical applications, such as spiritual history taking and assessing the interventions of chaplains. There is a useful section on low priority or dead-end research – no more studies on things we already know!

The rest of the book is a how-to-do-it research manual, a very good one and specifically directed to spiritual and health research. Anyone involved in any type of research in psychiatric epidemiology would benefit from reading Part 2, on Methods and Design, which has chapters on identifying the research question, choosing the design, selecting a sample, qualitative and observational research and clinical trials with and without religious intervention. Part 3 gives detailed attention to all aspects of measurement, and Part 4 deals with statistical analyses and modelling, including consideration of where things can go wrong. Publishing and funding is covered in Part 5, which has helpful chapters on publishing results, obtaining research funding and writing a grant application.

For anyone intending to carry out research in Religion/ Spirituality and Health, this book is essential reading **before** doing so. For others, with an interest in R/S research, it is clear and full of useful information and advice.