

Bernard Grad

Bernard Grad (1920-2010) was a Canadian biologist and cancer researcher who pioneered laboratory studies of 'laying-on-of-hands' or spiritual healing.

Life and Career

Bernard Grad was awarded a BS and a PhD from [McGill University](#) in 1949 where he remained throughout his professional career, working in experimental morphology. In 1985, he turned 65 and retired from McGill; unwilling to stop working, he was given an opportunity to continue at the [University of Quebec](#).

Grad said that in his early childhood he felt surrounded by a 'power or an energy in nature'.¹ His interest in spiritual healing began in the 1940s when he learned about the [orgone energy](#) theories of [Wilhelm Reich](#). The death of his daughter further stimulated his interest in spiritual matters, and in 1957 he came to know [Oskar Estebany](#), a Hungarian refugee who claimed to have healing powers. Working with Estebany in the 1960s, Grad carried out a series of experiments on plant seeds and mice that resulted in significant evidence of healing effects.

Background

Claims of miracle cures by 'faith healing' have been made since ancient times, although they are often extravagant and hard evidence is sparse. Even in well-documented cases it is difficult to rule out misdiagnosis, the effect of previous orthodox treatment or the placebo effect. Grad was the first to perform well-controlled laboratory experiments that address these concerns by investigating whether individuals with purported healing abilities could influence the health and well-being of living organisms. His research often involved direct interactions between healers and laboratory subjects, and he meticulously documented and analyzed the outcomes.

Animal Studies and Wound Healing

Working with Hungarian healer [Oskar Estebany](#), Grad designed an experiment with mice that had been inflicted with relatively painless wounds while anaesthetized.² The animals were then randomly divided into a healing group and two control groups, one of which was 'treated' by people with no claimed healing ability, the other left untreated (the wounds allowed to heal naturally). Estebany's role was limited to touching the cages where the mice were housed, as handling mice is known to facilitate normal healing responses. When Grad tested Estebany under blinded conditions, Estebany's mice healed significantly faster than the control mice.

Significantly, no such healing effects were observed when the cages were insulated under heavy bags. This suggested to Grad that, at least in the case of Estebany, the

healing effect was a local energetic phenomenon rather than a non-local quantum process.

In another experiment, goiters were induced artificially in 70 mice, those in the group treated by Estebany growing more slowly than those in two control groups. Goiter growth was slowed if mice were exposed to cloths that Estebany had held in his hands, and the mice were observed to consistently sit on them.[3](#)

Plant Studies

In addition to animal studies, Grad conducted experiments in which healers attempted to influence the growth of plants through focused intention. The aim was to discover whether healing could overcome adverse growing conditions. A control batch of plants was watered with a solution favourable to growth, while another batch was watered with saline, which retards growth. For a period of 14 days Estebany 'treated' the container containing the saline water by holding it. Despite the unfavourable conditions, Estebany's treated plants grew markedly faster than the control plants. This appeared to Grad as strong and clear evidence of a psychokinetic effect.

Chemical analysis revealed nothing unusual about the water in the container treated by Estebany, indicating that the effect came directly from him rather than by using water as a medium.[4](#) The strong effects were replicated in a second series of experiments.[5](#)

Controversy

The unconventional nature of his research and its challenge to established scientific paradigms sparked debates within the scientific community. Critics questioned the methodology, validity, and reproducibility of his findings. Grad countered scepticism by demonstrating continued evidence of psychokinetic effects over a series of experiments with Estebany and others.[6](#)

Legacy

Grad's legacy extends beyond his scientific contributions. His work inspired a new generation of parapsychologists to explore the effects of intention on healing outcomes, paving the way for hundreds of experiments on psychokinetic effects on living systems (see [DMILS in Distance Healing Research](#), [William Braud](#) and [Marilyn Schlitz](#).) Grad continued to do healing experiments over the decades.[7](#) The [University of Manitoba's archive and special collections](#) provides a repository for [Grad's papers](#), experimental data, biographical material and other materials.

Further experiments with Estebany were carried out by Kunz and Krieger, leading to the establishment of the technique named [Therapeutic Touch](#).

Grad's experiments with mice have been replicated by [William Bengston](#), in which he and others, in controlled laboratory conditions, were able to completely heal mice of cancer tumours that normally always lead to death within three to four weeks.[8](#)

Bengston writes:

Grad had performed experiments that would almost single-handedly change the way that we look at healing. Prior to Grad, the relevance and efficacy of whether or not a patient “believes” in healing was perhaps the biggest question about healing, when – if ever – it was discussed scientifically. After all, the pre-Grad era consisted mostly of collected cases and haphazard anecdotes. ... While it was still reasonable to believe that faith or belief could still influence the efficacy of hands-on healing, the efficacy itself can no longer be claimed to be only attributable to a patient’s faith or lack of faith. Clearly there is a biological and energetic basis to healing. How healing works is still open to question and is being explored. Whether healing happens, in a post-Grad era. . . well, that’s a no-brainer. The door was flung open forever. An entire new field of healing research had been created.⁹

Michael Duggan

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Harpur (1994).
- [2.](#) Grad et al (1961).
- [3.](#) Grad (1970), 20-21.
- [4.](#) Grad (1961).
- [5.](#) Grad (1964).
- [6.](#) Grad (1965).
- [7.](#) Bengston (2016).
- [8.](#) Bengston & Krinsley (2000); Bengston & Fraser (2010).
- [9.](#) Bengston (2016).