

Dr. Esther Sternberg Invited to Vatican to Speak on Universal Healing Spaces

Her talk in Lourdes, France, leads to a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI

TUCSON, Ariz., Feb. 14, 2013 – When **Esther Sternberg, MD**, gave a talk on healing spaces in Lourdes, France, this past summer, little did she suspect it would lead to a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI or the opportunity to speak at the Vatican.

Dr. Sternberg, now director of research for the [University of Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine](#) (AzCIM) at the UA College of Medicine – Tucson, is internationally recognized for her discoveries proving the role of the brain's stress response in illnesses. Before joining the UA, she was section chief of neuroendocrine immunology and behavior at the National Institute of Mental Health at the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

She has authored two popular books: *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions* and *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being*, and lectures on her research. Her research on place and well-being in these books led to her invitation to speak at the First Lourdes International Scientific Symposium in June.

During her talk in Lourdes, a city in Southern France known for Catholic pilgrimages and miraculous healings and described in her books, she spoke of the inherent elements of healing places like Lourdes and how to translate those elements to hospitals, clinics and health care in general. She said the location – beside a stream, with beautiful views and majestic mountains – the history and legacy of healing, and simply believing, all could activate the brain's dopamine reward regions, dull pain pathways and ultimately contribute to healing.

Of her own experience when she visited Lourdes, she says “No matter how sick you are when you get there, you feel better when you leave.”

Dr. Sternberg ended her talk recounting the story of her father's particular fondness for the 23rd Psalm, which includes the phrase, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil.” It speaks of green pastures and still waters and, above all,



Dr. Sternberg met Pope Benedict XVI at the 27th International Conference of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers in November (Photo courtesy of Fotografia Felici)

endurance. Her father, a Holocaust survivor, had walked through the shadow of death in a concentration camp during World War II and was transported by the psalm in times of need.

“You can be in a healing place physically, like at Lourdes, or you can read the psalm, and be transported to a place in your mind,” she says.

The response to her Lourdes talk was overwhelming. Immediately following, the president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers in Vatican City, Monsignor Zygmunt Zimowski, asked for a signed copy of her book for the pope and extended an invitation to be a distinguished speaker at the 27th International Conference of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers in November. Among other distinguished speakers at the conference were Italy’s Minister of Health Renato Balduzzi and Dr. Anarfi Asamoah-Baah, deputy director general of the World Health Organization. The Catholic Church’s commitment to healing and to attention to those in need includes efforts such as this conference and the legacy of Pope John Paul II in declaring Feb. 11 annual World Day of the Sick.

On Nov. 15, Dr. Sternberg spoke at the conference about “Healing Spaces: The Science of Place, Spirituality and Well-being, Implications for the Hospital Environment and Health.”

In Vatican City, she says, “There’s an enormous sense of power of this organization and you see it in the deep history of the place, you see it in the incredible art and then there’s this interesting juxtaposition. There are so many people doing good work. You can see individual acts of love, and peace and joy. A great spiritual sense.”

When Monsignor Zimowski introduced Dr. Sternberg to Pope Benedict XVI, he spoke of her work, her studies and – to her surprise – that she was of the Hebrew faith. “The pope held my hands gently and warmly, and looked deeply in my eyes and was totally present. I thanked him for inviting me and said, ‘I hope you will permit me to say shalom.’”

Dr. Sternberg says that of the hundreds of people who were invited to attend that conference, to be one of the very few non-Catholics and also to be invited to meet the pope was deeply meaningful. That act recognized her work, and the importance of bringing spirituality and healing into hospitals, and “represented a reaching across the religious divide and acknowledging we are of different faiths but have the same goals to help people heal.”

Moving forward with the mission of making hospitals truly healing spaces, the global congress – the participants in the International Conference of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers – intends to draft a white paper.

“It will have a reverberating effect of benefitting people around the world,” Dr. Sternberg says.

She plans to continue developing efforts with the Vatican in her new role at the UA, as well as engaging in existing relationships she has established with many agencies and

institutions with common goals. These include the military, to create and measure health outcomes of healing spaces for wounded warriors; the U.S. Green Building Council; and the American Institute of Architects.

“It’s thrilling to be at the UA where we can together lead the implementation of these concepts and improve health for all,” she says.

Dr. Sternberg’s research at the UA focuses on three areas: establishment of a biomarker laboratory that began at the NIH, aimed at development of a new sweat-patch technology to measure patients’ immune and stress responses; a comparative study on the effectiveness of integrative versus conventional medicine; and the establishment of the Institute for Place and Well-Being, a joint venture among the AzCIM, the [UA College of Medicine – Tucson](#), [UA College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture](#) and [UA Institute of the Environment](#).

Dr. Sternberg received her medical degree and trained in rheumatology at McGill University, Montreal, Canada, and was on the faculty at Washington University, St. Louis, Mo., before joining the National Institutes of Health in 1986. She joined the UA faculty in July 2012. Her many honors include recognition by the National Library of Medicine as one of 300 women physicians who have changed the face of medicine. For more information, please visit www.esthersternberg.com

About the University of Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine

The University of Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine (AzCIM) is leading the transformation of health care by creating, educating and actively supporting a community that embodies the philosophy and practice of healing-oriented medicine, addressing mind, body and spirit. Integrative medicine takes account of all lifestyle factors that influence health and makes use of conventional and complementary therapies, as appropriate. Since its inception, the AzCIM has focused its efforts on three areas: education, clinical care and research, with the primary emphasis on education. AzCIM was built on the premise that the best way to change a field is to educate the most gifted professionals and place them in settings where they can teach others. To learn more about AzCIM, please visit www.azcim.org

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