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## Secrets of Psychic Surgery

Q:

I know that skeptical explanations for so-called “psychic surgery” involve sleight of hand, making blood and tissue appear on a patient, but how much blood could one successfully palm in the hand for such an act? In the video I’m providing, there seems to be quite a bit of blood on the person’s spine. Could a person really palm enough blood with one hand to make such a mess?

—Tony J.

A:

Psychic surgery is performed around the world, primarily in Torrid Zone countries, including Brazil and Indonesia. In the performance, the healer appears to reach into a patient’s prone body and remove diseased tissue, usually in the stomach area and often without a real incision. It’s quite a spectacle and is accompanied by blood (or what *appears* to be blood—samples are rarely if ever tested) and small bits of gore. The patient feels no pain from the procedure, which makes it all the more impressive to everyone involved, until you realize that there’s no reason they *would* feel pain—for the same reason that a magician’s assistant feels no pain while being “sawed in half.” Skeptics, magicians, and skeptical magicians have debunked psychic surgery for decades, but the practice continues, especially in developing countries with limited access to medical care.

I examined the video Tony sent me, titled “El Hermanito, hijo de Pachita (Sanación espiritual)” available on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/4etuerk7> (see Figure 1). The video at the time stamp he supplied seems to show a famous Mexican healer known as Pachita, who conducted many psychic surgeries, allegedly guided by the spirit of Aztec

emperor Cuauhtémoc (ca. 1497–1525)—whose own medical qualifications are equally opaque.

I replied: You asked about how much “blood” a psychic surgeon or magician could successfully palm for a performance, and the answer is “a lot”! But before I get into that, I want to highlight that the quality of the image is very poor (it’s a low-resolution video of a TV show that features an old black and white photo). So it’s at best third-generation, and details are very poor. Any time you make a photographic copy—and especially a copy of a copy or a copy of a copy of a copy—the process both adds and removes details. This is important to consider in skeptical investigation, because, as Ray Hyman has cautioned, before trying to explain *how* or *why* something happened, be sure that it *did* happen. A seemingly mysterious dark or light spot in a duplication, for example, may not even appear in the original, which is why it’s best to seek out original sources when possible. Before spending weeks or months trying to figure out what a bright spot in an old photo might be (a ghost or UFO?), look for the film negative to see if it’s just a developing error or speck of dust. Of course, each copy also introduces an opportunity for someone to add fakery (though I see no indication of that in

this case).

Making matters worse (from an investigative point of view, though better from a believer’s), the photograph is a black and white image (which by definition contains less information than a color photo) and was taken in low light, with a flash, and thus inherently (though perhaps incidentally) obscures potentially important details due to limitations of the situation. This is of



Figure 1. A woman performs psychic surgery in a YouTube video.

course true for most mysterious photos and videos—of anything from Bigfoot to UFOs—characterized by their low light, low resolution, and poor focus.

The point is that trying to determine anything with any certainty from such a poor image is a fool's errand. Nevertheless, there are some clues. I am not a magician and have not personally faked psychic surgery in front of an audience, though I have some insight gleaned from articles, videos, and conversations with the late James "The Amazing" Randi, who did this many times, including for national audiences (see Figure 2).

Psychic surgeons have several advantages over magicians doing the same stunt, including an audience of the faithful who are strongly motivated to believe the performance is authentic. A magician is telling you it's a trick, so the audience is expecting deception and thus looking for signs of it. Then there's the setting: not a clear, clean, well-lit stage or table with cards or coins in full view but a bed and a patient with clothing (on both the healer and the patient) and sheets, pillows, and countless places that could easily hide a small pouch. Palming an object or packet of red ink, animal blood, or anything else under those conditions would not be difficult, and with practice can look very convincing. It's revealing that the tissues removed are invariably small and easily palmed. Presumably, if psychic surgery is real, there's no reason a ham-sized heart, liver, or lung couldn't be removed, displayed, healed, and then replaced. Even an ounce or two of blood can appear to be a much greater quantity than it really is, because it runs and spreads.

Tony followed up asking if the person taking the picture at that moment would see things as clearly through the camera lens as the picture would turn out, suggesting that the eyewitness report corroborates or validates the image. I replied that the human eye is much more sensitive than any camera, but it needs light. What's in the photo would not be seen as clearly by the photographer, or anyone else there, because it's illuminated by the flash. If anything, the flash would make it harder, not easier, to see what was going on when

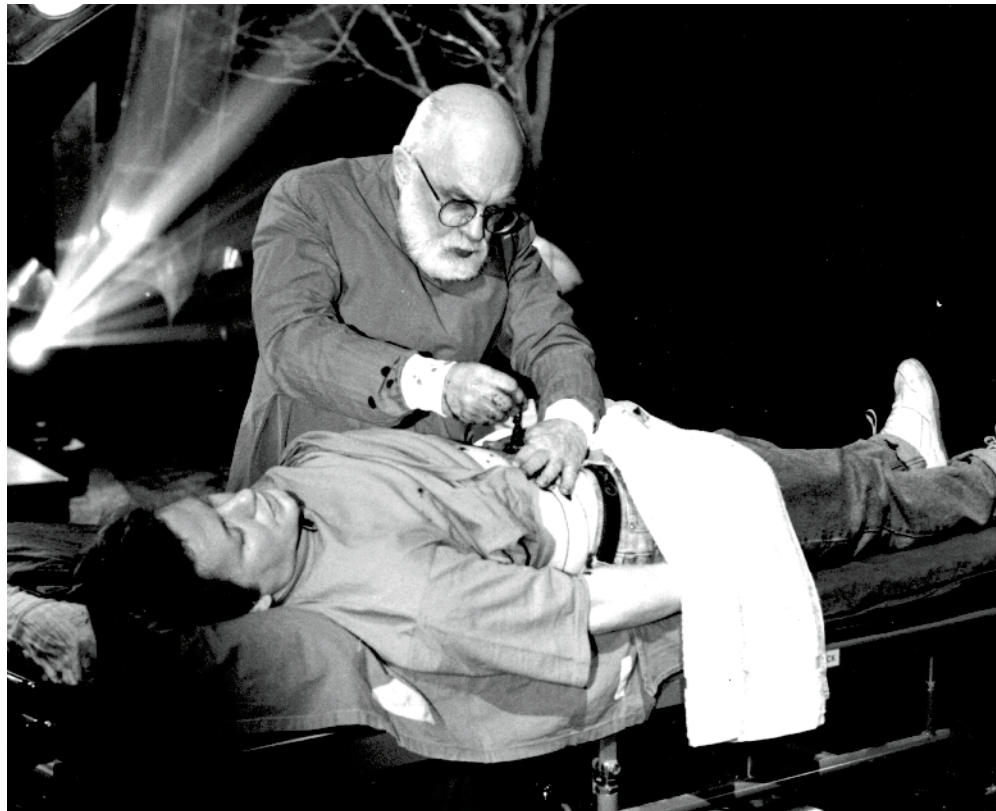


Figure 2. James "The Amazing" Randi uses sleight of hand to duplicate psychic surgery on his *Open Media* series for ITV in 1991. (Wikimedia Commons)

the photos were taken. Otherwise, it's a dark room with many opportunities for something to be hidden in hands or folds of sheets or anywhere else. Another factor is that the human eye is not like a camera because it has a brain behind it, directing the photographer's attention. A person, whether looking through a camera lens or not, is typically focusing on one specific aspect of what they're seeing—the dark mass under some trees, the odd light in the sky, the psychic healer's fingers, for example. Countless ghost and mysterious photos have been revealed as the result of photographers not paying attention to what's in the background and the context (see, for example, revelations about the famous Solway Firth "Space-man" photo debunked by folklorist David Clarke and Kenny Biddle's article "Ghostly 'Black Monk' or Random Tourist?" in the September/October 2018 *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*). Thus, on one hand the human eye is far more sensitive than a camera, but it's also far more susceptible to attention and perception biases.

The real danger in psychic surgery is not the procedure itself (being an illusion, it's harmless), but instead that the patient and audience will believe it's real and not seek effective medical care. One researcher who met with psychic surgeons in Brazil wrote of a "Dr." Hirota, who "has been practicing for over 20 years. He usually sees patients who come to his clinic in the mornings and he claims to treat 1,000 to 2,000 patients daily between 9 AM and 12 noon" (Omura 1997). Allowing for exaggeration, this one faith healer alone would be responsible for hundreds of thousands of sick and injured patients not seeking medical care. Given the prevalence of such people in Brazil (see the review section in this issue for one infamous example), there are easily tens of millions of victims. ■

#### Reference

- Omura, Y. 1997. Impression on observing psychic surgery and healing in Brazil which appear to incorporate qi gong energy & the use of acupuncture points. *Acupuncture & Electro-Therapeutics Research* 22(1): 17–33. Available online at <https://doi.org/10.3727/036012997816356815>.