Natasha Demkina claims to have X-ray vision. When she was 10 years old, she told her mother that she could see what looked like a vacuum cleaner hose, two beans, and a tomato inside her. Demkina was too young to know the names of bodily organs, but her mother believes she was talking about her intestines, kidneys, and heart. It wasn’t long before Demkina was diagnosing diseases and identifying injuries. She says that she can easily switch from her regular vision to what she calls medical vision. Medical vision allows her to see a colorful picture of a person’s insides for a split-second. Demkina often got headaches and was emotionally exhausted after viewing patients, but she was eager to help. Hoping to pay her way to medical school, she started seeing patients for 400 rubles each in her parents’ tiny apartment. As news of her gift spread, people came from all around Russia to consult with the young prodigy. They even gathered in groups outside where she lived. For most of them, doctors had been unable to diagnose their problems. Demkina was a last-ditch effort. Stories of Demkina’s diagnoses run the gamut from finding kidney stones to detecting pregnancy. During one test, she was able to diagnose a doctor’s stomach ulcer, along with its exact location. She also identified the internal screws and plates within a woman who had broken her leg. And she refuted another doctor’s diagnosis of a cancer patient, correctly diagnosing the problem as a small cyst. People were so impressed by Demkina’s abilities that scientists all over the world invited her to their labs. She did tests in England, the United States, and Japan. In perhaps the most famous of these experiments, Demkina failed. She was given descriptions of 7 different medical problems and had to correctly match these problems with 7 patients. She needed to get 5 out of 7 to pass the test, but only correctly diagnosed 4 of the patients. Demkina’s supporters say that the statistical chance of correctly guessing 4 out of 7 is so unlikely (about 2%) that it was actually a success. To be fair, some say extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. A 2% chance may be low, but as proof of X-ray vision, it doesn’t cut it. Others say that no proof will ever be enough to change the minds of skeptics. In the words of the priest and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, “To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible.” Whether you buy into her abilities or not, Demkina has won a place in the hearts of the many patients who have come to her for help.

Babka Vanda’s grandmother claimed to be able to heal people with just a whisper. The local priest forbade her from treating people until one day a snake bit the priest. Vanda’s grandmother whispered words into the wind, and just like that, the priest was cured and she was allowed to heal people again. Eventually, her grandmother passed down this ancient power to heal through whispering to her granddaughter, Babka Vanda. Babka Vanda is one of a handful of surviving whisperers. One whisperer said that she routinely cures tumors, nerves, fevers, and stammering. She even says her uncle’s whispering was so powerful he could paralyze a snake. Each disease is treated with its own special set of healing words. The words often rhyme and must be said in a single breath in a barely audible whisper. For a thousand years, healers in rural Belarus have practiced whispering, but today it is on its way out. As the country’s rural population declines, so does the belief in whispering. Many young people and city folk do not believe in the power of whispering, while others say that it’s primitive. While not as mystical, the idea of whispering therapy has popped up in a more modern form. ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. It is a pleasurable, tingling sensation that some people feel on the back of their head and neck when they hear certain sounds. This physical reaction can spread through the rest of the body, too. It is similar to the feeling you might get when you have goosebumps. There are lots of ASMR videos on YouTube. Most feature people whispering to the viewer. But some actually include personalized role-playing experiences. An example would be a person pretending to give a head massage. The creators try to interact with the viewer to relax them and allow them to experience the pleasure of ASMR. While some find it creepy, others swear that it’s healing. Some doctors believe it could help with anxiety, insomnia, and migraines. One practitioner even says it’s the dawn of a new era in stress relief and relaxation. She says that even if the viewer doesn’t experience ASMR, the videos will still relax them. The few remaining mystical whisperers, like Babka Vanda, say that people who know the words are dying and the young don’t believe in the practice. They say they don’t know who will whisper after their deaths. While it’s clear that ASMR is a far cry from the ancient practice of whispering, perhaps it is a new dawn for this unique form of relaxation and healing.