

UNIT 2: HANDOUT A

EXERCISE 2

CAUSES AND TREATMENTS OF ILLNESS AND 'OLD WIVES' TALES'

The Situation

A friend of yours has a streaming cold - sneezing, coughing and feeling hot and shivery. They have had to deal with many problems lately and their home suffers from dampness.

Explanations or possible 'Causes' of the illness

1. List as many things as you can think of that might have caused this cold.
2. What might a member of your family or community have said caused this cold? What might the doctor say? What might other people say?

'Treatments' or home remedies

3. What treatment/remedies would you suggest they do to help them to feel better and to get rid of the cold?
4. What would a member of your family or community have said? What might your doctor suggest?



UNIT 2: HANDOUT B

EXERCISE 3

DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Section 1

Harmony and balance

Health, seen as a state of harmony and balance within a person or, between the person and the environment, is an idea that goes back thousands of years. It was felt that if this balance is disrupted, illness results. There was also the idea that there is a strong connection between the individual person and the universe.

Hot and cold

Many ideas about treatments for illness that stretch back thousands of years focus on the importance of heat and cold. People were thought to mirror nature in terms of elements like heat, cold and dampness and so remedies for illness often stressed the importance of trying to maintain a balance between these. Hot, wet remedies, like drinks for a cold or a hot, dry atmosphere for other conditions were commonly used. This was called 'sympathetic' treatment.

In the Chinese tradition good health requires the harmony of Yin and Yang in a person, so that the body's energy (the chi) can circulate freely. An excess of Yin, associated with earth, water, darkness, cold, sorrow and death, produces chills. Too much Yang, associated with heaven, sun, fire, light, heat and joy, creates fevers. Chinese medicine works to restore the balance between these two elements. This is done by diet, hot or cold foods and acupuncture. Herbal medicine also plays a large part in the Chinese tradition. These beliefs stretch back nearly 5000 years.



UNIT 2: HANDOUT B (CONT)

DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Section 2

Public health, people and their environment

Over 4000 years old, the Indian Ayurvedic tradition has influenced western thinking, proposing a connection between people and their natural environment. These ideas were refined and developed around 400 BC by Hippocrates, a Greek doctor and philosopher. Known as the father of modern medicine, he devised the Oath of Medical Ethics still taken by physicians today as they begin their medical practice. He stressed the importance of treating the whole person, quoting that “It’s far more important to know what person the disease has than what disease the person has.”

The public health developments in the nineteenth century revived Hippocrates’ ideas and emphasised the importance of housing, of clean water and of adequate sewage systems. Think of all the Victorian bath houses, swimming pools and sewage works there are in many Scottish towns. Also, think of the way many Scottish towns are built – i.e. they generally have an affluent West End where the prevailing Westerly wind will blow the smoke (and the smells) from the poorer East End in the opposite direction.

With the improvement of the microscope in the 1880s, scientists were able to see the existence of tiny micro-organisms which could grow very quickly in the right conditions. They made the link between bacteria and disease. Germ theory focused attention on the individual and how disease was spread by contacts between people. It drew attention away from the public health measures that focused on wider social conditions such as housing, drains and a good water supply. Within the public health field, attention became more directed towards personal hygiene: lice, scabies, dirty bodies and so on

This emphasis on environmental or public health issues resurfaced in the 1970s. Current thinking about climate change focuses on our impact on the environment and its resulting effects on our populations across the globe. These build on public health concerns such as pollution and traffic as they affect individuals and large populations.



UNIT 2: HANDOUT B (CONT)

DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Section 3

Western biomedical beliefs

Modern, western, scientific medicine explains health in terms of our biology - how our bones and muscles fit together and how various organs and systems work - the heart, the brain, our arteries and so on. It sees the body as a well-functioning machine which, if it goes wrong, can mostly be repaired by surgical and medical expertise. This way of thinking about health and illness began to be accepted in Europe about 90 years ago. For thousands of years before that, it would have been considered very strange to separate the mind from the body. It was the norm to think about the mind, body and spirit as a whole.

The growth of scientific knowledge had a great influence on our understanding of illness and disease. Science was able to explain how the body worked, what the heart did and how the muscles and bones worked. A hundred years ago, the microscope was able to show even greater details of the human body - the structure of individual human cells. As science grew in importance, people felt it could explain everything and it was accorded great status.

Doctors became more and more interested in what was going on inside our bodies or in particular bits of our bodies. They studied the signs and symptoms of disease and how disease progressed in the body. X-rays, blood samples and all kinds of tests became important in diagnosing disease. The impact of viruses and bacteria on the body were understood and the use of drugs revolutionised many major illnesses. It also meant that doctors' knowledge became more specialised.

It has been suggested that the medical focus switched from the whole person to investigating signs and symptoms. Doctors had less need to listen to what people understood about their illnesses or how they felt as a whole person. Ideas about health which concentrate on the balance within a whole person mean that doctors, healers or therapists have to listen very carefully to what the person has to say.

