Book Reviews

Culture, Health and Illness: An Introduction for Health Professionals, 4th Edition
Cecil G. Helman
Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press, 2000
336 pages; $37.50

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Interest in providing more culturally responsive and effective health care to our diverse populations has grown in recent years. The Georgetown University National Center on Cultural Competence has identified several reasons for this growing interest: to respond to current and projected demographic changes in the United States; to eliminate longstanding disparities in the health status of people of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; to improve the quality of services and health outcomes; to meet legislative, regulatory, and accreditation mandates; to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace; and to decrease the likelihood of liability/malpractice claims.[1]

The important need for cultural competence at the systems level, in health care organizations, and for measuring outcomes, tracking quality, and monitoring disparities was also recently reviewed in an excellent article in *Public Health Reports*.[2]

Many health professions/disciplines including public health, nursing, mental health, social work, medicine, dentistry, and allied health fields have begun to develop cultural competency curricula and training programs that are designed to improve practitioners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in this area. An important challenge is finding a text that succinctly pulls together the vast existing published literature.

Enter Cecil G. Helman's *Culture, Health and Illness*, a marvelous book (originally published in 1984) which has been continually updated to keep up with new developments in the field. Dr. Helman is a British general practitioner/medical anthropologist who has a gift for writing and a thorough knowledge of the subject derived from his work as a clinician, researcher, and educator. His introductory text has been used in countries around the world by teachers and students from a wide variety of health professions and sociobehavioral science disciplines.

The fourth edition is a scholarly tour de force, and contains a wealth of valuable information presented in an engaging and relevant manner. The book is divided into 14 chapters: "Introduction: The Scope of Medical Anthropology," "Cultural Definitions of Anatomy and Physiology," "Diet and Nutrition," "Caring and Curing: The Sectors of Health Care," "Doctor-Patient Interactions," "Gender and Reproduction," "Pain and Culture," "Culture and Pharmacology," "Ritual and the Management of Misfortune," "Cross-Cultural Psychiatry," "Cultural Aspects of Stress," "Cultural Factors in Epidemiology," "Medical Anthropology and Global Health," and "New Research Methods in Medical Anthropology."

The last two chapters are completely new and should be of particular interest to public health audiences. Important topics covered include: overpopulation, urbanization, AIDS, primary health care, malaria, pollution and global warming, deforestation and species extinction, and quantitative and qualitative research techniques used in medical anthropology investigations. Each of the other chapters has been updated with new information, and includes expanded discussions of issues such as cross-cultural health and the human life cycle; immigrant and refugee health; narratives of illness and misfortune; stress, somatization, and psychosomatic illness; the impact of medical technology on health; disability, health, and illness; traditional healing and substance abuse; and the cultural dimensions of risk reduction and prevention, to name just a few. Illustrative case studies, an extensive list of references, and selected Web addresses are provided, permitting the reader to explore topics in greater depth and breadth. A series of helpful "clinical questionnaires" related to each of the chapters is also available in the appendix; these can be used as study guides and for generating group discussion.

Instead of looking at the health beliefs and practices of specific ethnic groups, Dr. Helman emphasizes general anthropological principles and the importance of perspectivism, context, diversity, and holism. This reduces the risk of stereotyping and moves us away from potentially dangerous "cookbook approaches" that can mask the heterogeneity that exists both within and between groups. Given that the audience for the book is international in nature, readers will also find interesting the discussion about medical pluralism and the comparisons made between the health care systems of the United States and the United Kingdom.

As with any text, there are some minor points to quibble with. In Chapter 1, for example, a growing

number of websites relating to culture and health from outside of the field of medical anthropology (e.g., http://www.diversityrx.org; http:erc.msh.org/quality&culture; http://www.tcns.org) need to be added to those listed (page 11). In Chapter 4, the author writes that biomedicine has played a critical role in "preventing and treating disease, alleviating suffering, and increasing life expectancy." While this is certainly true, perhaps even more important in having "eradicated the major killer infectious diseases in most Western countries" (page 67) have been *public health* interventions such as improved sanitation, vaccinations, and nutritious diets. In Chapter 7, the author may be premature in dismissing "private prayers or religious observance" as having "no technical effect" (page 156), given the increased interest in studying the biopsychosocial impact of spirituality and religion in the healing process. In Chapter 11, an apt critique of Selye's model of stressors and stress responses is presented, and the need to attend to context is pointed out. Yet while "psychological, social, cultural, and economic" contextual factors (p. 203) are indeed important, I would also want to add historical, political, technological, and environmental factors to this list. Finally, the inclusion of a summary chapter that could tie things together for the reader would be very helpful.

This reviewer also hopes that future editions of the book will include coverage of the following additional topics: (*a*) the demography/epidemiology of health and illness in multicultural populations; (*b*) public health initiatives relating to the elimination of racial and ethnic health disparities (e.g., *Healthy People 2010* [http://www.health.gov/healthypeople]); US-UK Collaborative Initiative on Ethnic and Racial Health (http://www.omhrc.gov/us-uk/index.htm); (*c*) cultural competence in health care organizations and other service delivery systems; (*d*) culturally and linguistically appropriate service standards (e.g., National Recommended CLAS Standards [http://www.omhrc.gov/clas]); (*e*) cultural competence training initiatives and activities; (*f*) race, ethnicity, and pharmacology; (*g*) cross-cultural medical ethics; (*h*) sociocultural aspects of medical errors, liability, risk management, and quality improvement; (*i*) racism, discrimination, and other forms of oppression in medicine and public health; and (*j*) participatory action research with communities.

This "wish list" of additional topics should not be seen in any way as detracting from the enormous value of this very informative and well written book. Rather, given the dynamic nature of the field, there is a continuing need for health professionals to stay abreast of and informed about the sociocultural aspects of health and illness given the increasing diversity of the workforce and the populations being served. I personally have made extensive use of *Culture, Health, and Illness* over the years in teaching medical and public health classes, and the students have uniformly found it to be an excellent, informative, and enjoyable text. It is with great enthusiasm that I highly recommend the latest edition of this best-selling modern classic. It is a reading journey well worth taking, and one that will be transformative of your views of the world.

REFERENCES

1. Cohen E, Goode TD. Rationale for cultural competence in primary health care. Policy Brief 1. Washington: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Child Development Center; 1999.
2. Chin JL. Culturally competent health care. Public Health Rep 2000;115:25-33.

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