

Unit VI: Some Aspects of Medical Anthropology Applicable to Public Health Core Actions and Interventions

- Cultural perspective of sickness, illness and disease
- Beliefs and taboos related to treatment
- Treatment seeking behaviors
- Self-medication

Cultural perspective of Sickness, Illness and Disease:

- Culture refers to the values, beliefs, customs, knowledge and behaviors that are shared by members of a society and which provide direction for people as to what is acceptable or unacceptable in a given system or situation.
- The cultural system of health emphasize the symbolic dimension of the understanding of health and includes the knowledge, perception, and belief system and continuous use to define , classify, perceive and explain about disease.

➤ Disease (Physical Dysfunction)

➤ Illness (Psychological Dysfunction)

➤ Sickness (Social Dysfunction)

➤ The concept of disease, illness, and Sickness emphasizes different perspective on important aspect of human life.

➤ They reflect professional, personal and perspective and concern biological , phenomenological and behavioral phenomena respectively.

- **Sociologists have demonstrated** that the spread of diseases is heavily influenced by the socioeconomic status of individuals, ethnic traditions or beliefs, and other cultural factors.
- The prevalence and response to different diseases varies by culture.
- Sociologists agree that alcohol consumption, smoking, diet, and exercise are important issues, but they also see the importance of analyzing the cultural factors that affect these patterns.

Disease

- The term “**Disease**” literally means “Without Ease” – disease, the opposite of ease – when something is wrong with bodily function.
- In medical sociology, a disease is defined as “ An adverse physical state, consisting of a physical dysfunction within an individual, as compared to an illness (Psychological awareness of a disease) or sickness (A social state)- Cockerham, 1997
- In simplest words, **Disease** is just the opposite of **Health**.
- i.e. Any deviation from normal functioning or state of complete physical or mental wellbeing.

- **Determinants of Disease:** (Biological Factors, Socio-cultural factors, Environmental factors, Political Factors etc.)
- Types: Communicable and Non-communicable diseases.

b. Illness (Psychological Dysfunction):

- It is a subjectively interpreted undesirable state of health.
- It consists of subjective feelings, perception of the adequacy of their bodily function and feeling of competence.
- According to Parke, “ Illness is a subjective state of the person who feels aware of not being well”.
- Ontologically, Illness is the subjective feelings state of the individual often referred to as symptoms.

- Illness in every society are socially constructed concept discussed using key cultural symbols and metaphor.
- In every society, health and illness are understood through the use of shared cultural heritage. Health and illness are concept related to cultural understanding of the mind- body relationship (Weitz, 2010).

c. Sickness (Social Dysfunction):

- It is the state of being ill or unhealthy. Sickness is the external and public mode of unhealthy. It is a social role of an person.
- Sickness is derived from the concept of the sick role, a role that carries certain privilege as well as obligation. It is a social identity
- It is the poor health or the health problem of an individual defined by others with reference to the social activity of that individual.

- Sickness as, “ An event located in society defined by participation in the social system”.
- According to Parke, “ Sickness is a state of social dysfunction i.e. a role that an individual assumes when ill/ sick role.
- Sickness:
 1. Sick Role
 2. Social Role
 3. Social Status and Role.

Some aspects of cultural perspectives

- **Cultural Understanding:** Different cultures may have distinct definitions and understandings of sickness, illness, and disease. For instance, in some cultures, illness might be considered a result of imbalances in the body's energy or spiritual disharmony, while in others, it may be attributed to physiological factors or external pathogens.
- **Causation:** Cultural beliefs about the causes of illnesses vary widely. Some cultures may attribute illnesses to supernatural forces, karma, or divine punishment, while others focus on biological factors, environmental influences, or lifestyle choices.

- **Healing Practices:** Many cultures have their own traditional healing practices passed down through generations. These practices often include the use of medicinal plants, rituals, massage, acupuncture, or other forms of alternative medicine.
- **Stigma and Social Perception:** How sickness and disease are perceived socially can differ across cultures. In some societies, certain illnesses may carry a significant stigma, leading individuals to hide their conditions or face discrimination.

- **Cultural Competence in Healthcare:** Healthcare professionals need to be culturally competent, understanding and respecting the diverse cultural perspectives on sickness and health. This involves recognizing and valuing different cultural beliefs and incorporating them into healthcare practices when appropriate.
- **Attitudes Towards Seeking Help:** The willingness to seek medical help or disclose illness can also be influenced by cultural norms. Some cultures may prioritize collective well-being, leading individuals to seek help early, while others may emphasize self-reliance and self-healing.

- **Rituals and Ceremonies:** Cultural rituals and ceremonies often play a role in coping with illness or disease. These rituals can include prayer, purification rites, or communal gatherings to support the sick individual and their family.
- **Language and Expressions:** Different cultures might have specific terminology and expressions related to sickness, illness, and disease. Understanding the nuances of these terms is essential for effective communication and healthcare delivery.

- It is crucial to recognize and appreciate the diversity of cultural perspectives on health and illness to ensure equitable and effective healthcare practices.
- Respect for cultural beliefs and practices can enhance patient-provider relationships and lead to better health outcomes for individuals from various cultural backgrounds.
- Public Health Actions and Interventions can be more effective when they consider cultural factors and engage with communities in a culturally appropriate manner.

Ethno medicine

- Ethno medicine broadly refers to the traditional medical practices concerned with the cultural interpretation of health, diseases, and illness that addresses the healthcare process and healing practices (Krippner and Staples, 2003).

Ethno medicine :

- It is the comparative study of cultural ideas about wellness, illness, and healing.
- For the majority of our existence, human beings have depended on the resources of the natural environment and on health and healing techniques closely associated with spiritual beliefs.
- Many such practices, including some herbal remedies and techniques like acupuncture, have been studied scientifically and found to be effective.
- Others have not necessarily been proven medically effective by external scientific evidence, but continue to be embraced by communities that perceive them to be useful.

- When considering cultural ideas about health, an important place to start is with ethno-etiology: cultural explanations about the underlying causes of health problems.
- Ethno medicine is concerned with the cultural interpretations of health, disease and illness and also addresses the health care seeking process and healing practices.

Self-medication:

- It has traditionally been defined as “the taking of drugs, herbs or home remedies on one’s own initiative, or on the advice of another person, without consulting a doctor
- **According to the World Health Organization** ‘self-medication is the use of drugs to treat self-diagnosed disorders or symptoms, or the intermittent or continued use of a prescribed drug for chronic or recurrent diseases or symptoms’ .
- The society prefers self-medication at times due to easiness and time saving with saving costs.
- Self-medication has its own consequences, which can cause unexpected financial burden as it may produce unintended reactions that may further require medical attention.

Self Medication

- **Self-medication** is the selection and use of medicines by individuals to treat self recognized illnesses or symptoms.
- Self-care is what people do for themselves to establish and maintain health, prevent and deal with illness.
- **Self Medication** is the use of medications without the prior medical consultation regarding indication, dosage, and duration of treatment. – **WHO**
- **Responsible Self Medication** is beneficial but irresponsible self medication often poses threat to public health.
- Different factors like education, family, society, law, availability of drugs, exposure to advertisement influence self medication.

Causes for Self Medication

- Urge to self care
- Lack of time
- Lack of health service
- Financial constraint
- Ignorance, misbelieves, extensive advertisement and easy accessibility and availability of drugs at dispensaries or other shops.
- Feeling of sympathy towards family members in sickness

Consequences of Self Medication (Public Health Threats)

- Adverse Drug Reactions
- Risk of disease aggravation
- Chance of using wrong medication or incorrect manner of administration or wrong dosage which may affect health and even cause death
- Drug interactions
- Development of resistance to drugs and antibiotics
- May lead to drug dependence and addiction

Prevention of Self Medication

- Strict enforcement of law to restrict the sale and purchase of medicines without prescription
- Provision of health education to people (Mass media can be used)
- Inclusion of rationale use of medicines in student's curriculum
- Aware pharmacists about the legal aspects, consumer protection act
- Regular market inspection and monitoring

- Many studies have reported adverse reactions with commonly used prescription drugs and OTC products, so their inappropriate use may result in irrational drug therapy and delay in seeking medical care and sometimes which can cause side effect
- Self-medication includes acquiring medicines without a prescription, resubmitting old prescriptions to purchase medicines, sharing medicines with relatives or members of one's social circle or using leftover medicines stored at home.
- **The World Health Organization (WHO)** stated that self-medication has the potential to do good as well as cause harm since it involves the use of drugs. It has appropriately pointed out that responsible self-medication can help prevent and treat diseases that do not require medical consultation and provides a cheaper alternative for treating common illnesses.

Treatment Seeking Behaviors:

- It is the process of care seeking by individuals for improving the perceived disease.
- It has been defined as any activity undertaken by individuals who perceive themselves to have a health problem or to be ill for the purpose of finding an appropriate remedy.
- The decision making for the treatment seeking is a dynamic and continuous process which can be affected with various factors.
- The factors are divided in to Internal and External Factors.

Treatment Seeking Behaviors:

- People seek treatment from different types of health care practitioner depending on their perception and belief about a particular set of symptoms.
- These perception and belief are influenced and defined by social surrounding and network relationship.
- The utilization of a health care system, public or private, and answers.
- Practices related formal or non formal may depend on socio – usually enquire about the use of preventive measures **or demographic factors, social structures, literacy, cultural different health care options** . conditions, and the disease pattern and health care.

- Healthcare treatment-seeking behavior varies within and between communities and is modified by socio-economic, demographic, and physical factors.

- The first major theory within sociology that analyzed the role of health and illness in social life was devised by the functionalist theorist **Talcott Parsons** (1951) in his book '**The Social System**'.
- Parsons did not disagree with the dominance of the medical model of health in determining illness, yet argued that being ill was not just a biological condition, but also a social role (with a set of norms and values assigned to the role).
- Parsons saw illness as a form of deviant behavior within society, the reason being that people who are ill are unable to fulfill their normal social roles and are thus deviating away from the consensual norm.

- According to this theory , when an individual is sick they adopt a role of being ill.

The sick role has four main components:

1. The individual is not responsible for their state of illness.
2. The individual is excused from performing normal roles and tasks.
3. There is general recognition that being sick is an undesirable state.
4. To facilitate recovery the individual is expected to seek medical assistance to comply medical treatment.

- Suchman's Stages of illness and medical care (1965), indicate five stages of the individuals decision making process in determining whether or not to utilize health care.
 1. The individual symptoms experiences:
 2. The individual assumption of a sick role:
 3. Medical care contact:
 4. The assumptions of dependent patient role VS acceptance of professional health care treatment:
 5. The individual recover from illness:

Responsible factors of Treatment Seeking Behaviors:

- a. **Psychological factors:** (Fear of death and treatment outcomes, Fear of financial consequences, depression, anxiety, motivation, perception, self esteem, attitude towards health care , disease and treatment, trusting to health care providers etc.).
- b. **Individual related Factors:** (Level of education, age, caste, class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, occupation, marital status, medical history, food habits etc.).
- c. **Socio-Cultural Factors:** (Family and society, household size, social interaction, socio-cultural norms, values, belief, folkways, tradition etc.)

Responsible factors of Treatment Seeking Behaviors:

- d. Situational Factors:** (Health care quality, Geographical situation of health facilities, No. of healthcare providers organization, treatment methods, medicine system, insurance mechanism etc.)
- e. Marketing related factors:** (Advertisement, Mass media, cost of services, ways of communication etc.)

Belief and Taboos related treatment:

- A public health approach is needed to address problems associated with behavior.
- Food behaviors and culture are strongly associated in Nepalese society.
- People follow the code of conduct in relation to food consumption, food preparation method, eating habits, selection of foods, the means taken daily time of portion of meal and eating size food habits and belief start early in the life of an individual and may undergo some modification throughout the life.

Belief and Taboos related treatment:

- The avoidance of specific types of food is a widespread phenomenon and applies more commonly to food of animal origin.
- Religious and other beliefs often call for this avoidance, but other cultural factors are involved as well; some foods are regarded as being of low prestige
- for example. Most people avoid the meat of animals that have died of natural causes, especially if they were diseased.
- This natural trait is strengthened by injunctions of the major religions. However, beliefs can differ sharply.
- Food taboos among rural women have been identified as one of the factors contributing to maternal undernutrition in pregnancy

➤ **Some Example of belief and taboos in Nepalese Societies:**

- a. **Menstruation Practice.**
- b. **Incest taboos.**
- c. **Food avoidance and taboos**
- d. **Food taboos during pregnancies**
- e. **Dietary habits etc.**

- **Forbidden Medicinal Plants:** Certain plants may be considered sacred or have spiritual significance in a culture, leading to taboos against using them for medicinal purposes. Using these plants for healing might be seen as disrespectful or inappropriate.
- **Prohibited Medical Interventions:** Some cultures may have strong taboos against specific medical interventions or procedures. For example, certain surgical procedures might be considered invasive or unnatural and are therefore avoided.
- **Restrictions During Pregnancy:** Pregnant women may be subject to various taboos, such as avoiding certain foods, activities, or visiting specific places, based on beliefs about ensuring a safe pregnancy and childbirth.

- **Fear of Medical Technology:** Advanced medical technologies, such as MRI or X-ray machines, might be viewed with suspicion or fear in some societies due to their unfamiliarity or perceived unnaturalness.
- **Blood Taboos:** In some cultures, blood has deep symbolic and cultural significance, and its handling may be subject to strict taboos. This can extend to medical practices involving blood, such as blood transfusions or blood tests.
- **Treatment Involving Taboo Animals:** Certain animals may be considered sacred or taboo in some cultures, making the use of their body parts or products in medical treatments unacceptable.

- **Bodily Contact:** Some cultures may have taboos surrounding physical contact between healers and patients. For instance, certain tribes may believe that certain parts of the body, such as the head or feet, are spiritually sensitive and should not be touched during treatment.
- **Gender Restrictions:** In some societies, there could be taboos related to the gender of the healer and the patient. For example, a male healer might not be allowed to treat a female patient or vice versa, due to cultural beliefs about purity or modesty.
- **Rituals and Ceremonies:** Many cultures have specific rituals or ceremonies related to healing and treatment. Breaking these rituals or performing them incorrectly could be considered taboo and might be believed to bring harm to the patient.

- **Interference with the Spirit World:** In cultures that believe in spirits or ancestors, certain treatment methods might be considered taboo because they involve communicating with or invoking the spirit world. Interfering with the spirits inappropriately could be seen as disrespectful or dangerous.
- **Breaking Traditional Practices:** Some cultures may have strict traditional treatment methods that have been passed down through generations. Using modern or Western medical practices instead of traditional ones could be considered taboo.
- **Time and Timing:** In certain cultures, specific treatment procedures or rituals may be taboo during certain times of the day, month, or year. This could be influenced by astrological beliefs or seasonal considerations.

- **Contamination and Purity:** Practices involving bodily fluids or substances may be subject to taboos, as they could be seen as contaminating or impure. This could affect how treatments are administered or the types of remedies used.
- **Death and Mourning Practices:** Some cultures have specific taboos related to death and mourning. Certain treatment methods might be considered taboo during mourning periods, or there could be restrictions on how the body of a deceased person is handled.
- **Use of Animal Parts:** In traditional medicine, the use of animal parts or products for healing purposes is common in some cultures. However, taboos might dictate which animals can be used, how they are hunted or harvested, and how their parts are utilized.

Thank You!