Some reorientation is required, and the first step should be for health professionals to delineate the boundaries of "health." Professionals should work to convince the public that the right approach is that of positive health. The use of the word "health" in a negative sense should be avoided in both professional and official circles, so that the public’s perceptions are less influenced by failures in therapeutic techniques or service provision. An immense effort should be made to indicate the need for personal responsibility in matters of health.

The WHO definition of health implies that the infirm cannot be healthy, but it might be difficult to convince competitors in the Handicapped Olympics of this. What is the position of symptomless persons carrying pathogenic viruses or bacteria? They are apparently healthy, yet their future health, and that of their contacts, may be in question. More complex are the problems related to heritable infirmities. Some conditions have their origins in genes coded for recessive physical or metabolic abnormalities, and as it is likely that most people have at least one such gene, the classic definitions of health are inappropriate here. As the possibilities of gene therapy become apparent, decisions will be needed as to when health has become so diminished that treatment is required.

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Discussions on how to embrace the mental and social, as well as the physical, components of health in a definition should involve not only health professionals but also members of the wider intellectual community. Perhaps it will prove impossible to find a single definition covering all the diverse aspects of positive health.

It is probable that these considerations will have wide repercussions on training. It is not enough to think that the existing definitions have served well in the past. One reason why the positive approach has been neglected is that senior health professionals have been unwilling to discuss it in depth and to contemplate the practical implications of what might emerge. It is to be hoped that the health professions will be able to help the public to adopt scientifically-based attitudes uninfluenced by the pronouncements of medical pundits as interpreted by the mass media. If this happens a contribution towards better health for all will undoubtedly have been made.

References

In Focus
Eyitope Ogunbodede

Dental care: the role of traditional healers

In Nigeria, as in many other developing countries, traditional healers are still providing dental care, but their work is not recognized by dentists. In general, traditional healers are open to the prospect of collaborating with the dental profession, whereas the reverse is not true.

In Africa, caries and periodontal disease are the most prevalent dental problems. If untreated, both lead to painful episodes and loss of teeth. Malocclusion is also common. Less frequent are fractured teeth, hypoplastic teeth, tooth attrition and abrasion, fractured jaws, congenital abnormalities, and tumours.

Modern dental services are diagnostic, preventive, curative and restorative. Most healers are more numerous than dental practitioners in Nigeria, and are widely accepted by the people. They can be trained in routine diagnostic procedures and encouraged to refer complicated cases to modern dental centres. There is a need to explain to them that considerable harm may result from delaying referral or denying patients the opportunity for modern treatment.

In Africa, chewing sticks are commonly used as a tooth-puller. Traditional healers are more numerous than dental practitioners in Africa, and are widely accepted by the people. They can be trained in clinical procedures and encouraged to refer complicated cases to modern dental centres. There is a need to explain to them that considerable harm may result from delaying referral or denying patients the opportunity for modern treatment.
In the area of curative dentistry, African traditional healers treat exposed pulps using concentrated solutions obtained from the leaves, bark or roots of trees. It would be worth investigating the efficacy and chemical composition of these extracts employed. The extraction of loose teeth may continue to be done by traditional healers, especially in remote villages where there is little or no access to modern dental care. There is, however, a need to improve hygiene in traditional healers’ practices.

Another area that should be explored is that of fracture reduction by traditional healers. The effectiveness of traditional bone-setters has been demonstrated (6), although little or no access to modern dental care, especially in remote villages where there is little or no access to modern dental care. There is, however, a need to improve hygiene in traditional healers’ practices.

Traditional healers are a particularly valuable asset in communities where modern dental care is not readily available. The deep-rooted confidence of non-Westernized Africans in traditional healers should be turned to the greatest possible advantage in the field of dental health. Traditional dental practices should be evaluated with a view to arriving at effective and efficacious modalities of treatment.

References

Readers’ Forum

How to “stretch” health budgets

SIR — The WHO Expert Committee Report Management of human resources for health (Technical Report Series, No. 783, pp. 12–13, quoted in World Health Forum, Vol. 11, No. 4, p. 345) suggests that a 10% rise in personnel productivity would mean that 10 workers could do the work of 11, thus “freeing” one person for other work. While we would all encourage greater productivity from ourselves and our staff, perhaps a better way to stretch the health dollar would be to promote lay participation in the delivery of health programmes. This has been successfully demonstrated in North Karelia, Finland (7), Pawtucket, Rhode Island, USA (2) and, recently, on the north coast of New South Wales, Australia (3).

Not only would this approach add extra helping hands and increase the number of change agents in the community, it would also come closer to the guideline set out in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (4). Health is undoubtedly more about participation than it is about squeezing an extra 10% from our staff.

Ray James
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Preventive measures after the Turkish flood disaster

SIR — The flood disaster on the night of 19 June 1990 in the Trabzon region on the Black Sea coast of Turkey left 59 people dead and 15 missing. After 24 hours people who were looking for relatives or lost articles were in great distress and not in a position to be concerned about health problems. Both the people and the officials who had lived through the disaster were still under the shock of the event. It was impossible for them to cope financially and psychologically with the losses locally available, and also very difficult for them to adapt to the situation. The help from outside the disaster area had to not only be financial and practical but also include organization and planning, which could be done better by officials who had not lived through the disaster.

The coordinators and their helpers who reached the disaster area 24 hours later determined the risk areas first. They marked on the map the water and sewer systems, and the damage done to them, then applied calcium chloride to the damaged areas. While the utility systems were being repaired, the health service unit started epidemiological surveillance (ES) studies. Six ES teams were formed, each with a doctor, a nurse, a health technician, four midwives and one driver with a vehicle. The health personnel went to every house and gave information and guidance. Case suspected of being diarrrhoea or infectious hepatitis were detected, and cultures or blood samples were taken from suspected cases and sent to the laboratory.

Although every household was told to drink water after boiling it, this was not always done. So US$ 10 000 worth of drinking water in plastic bags was distributed, and the chlorinated water brought in by tankers was regularly inspected. The health personnel kept a watch on the prevalence of water-borne and food-borne