Health and Illness in History, Science and Society

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Abstract

Health is a fundamental human right. The World Health Organization defines it as a “state of complete physical, psychological and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. The health of individuals, however, is also linked to the environment in which they live and especially to their ability to adapt and integrate into their life context. The relationship with the environment is extremely important because it is that interaction that outlines the concept of normality compared to pathology. Such normality needs to be contextualised by gender, geographical origin and by the individuals’ living conditions: as a matter of fact, what is normal for a young person may differ from what is normal for a senior one. That is to say, the concept of health is indeed relative and it is the result of an interesting evolution of the concept of illness. From the first approaches - dealing with the mere treatment of the symptoms - to the promise of a free-from-pain society, science and economics have played an significant role in redefining the dualism health/illness. The article reflects on these two concepts, health and illness, in history and nowadays, and discusses the future of the medical science.

Introduction

Analysing the concept of illness is a rather complex task. Just like for the concept of health – presented by the philosopher Hans - Georg Gadamer as a “[...] general feeling of personal well-being [which] appears mostly when we, in our feeling of personal well-being, are open to new things, are ready to start new business, without considering demands made on us” [1] - there is an important dimension of relativity that needs to be considered: it could be stated that, in the presence of illness, there is a significant change in the functionality of an organism or the entire organism. W. E. Boyd maintains that “illness is a change of the condition in which the organism is in perfect harmony with its environment [...]” [2].

The concept of illness has evolved. In the past, it was linked to the presence of microbes. Later, the emphasis was placed on the constitution and the environment. Nowadays, illness is seen as a system that the body puts in place to find again its lost balance [3] In ancient times, feeling ill concerned the individual only; today, a state of illness can be diagnosed by a physician by objective criteria. Therefore the concept of illness can be seen from many different perspectives.

It is interesting to note that, in the English language, there are three terms to indicate a pathological state: illness, which identifies the personal emotional state connected to the loss of health; disease, which refers to the objective,
The influence of economics on the treatment of illness

Economic sustainability is now an issue to which health policies for prevention and treatment are inextricably linked. In recent decades, the healthcare expenditure in Western countries has shown a steady increase and health today is the most important sector of the economy of a nation. Western countries annually spend on healthcare a significant part of their gross domestic product (GDP). The United States in 2003 spent $ 5,635 - the 14% of GDP - for every single citizen: only $ 1,500 out of this amount were spent for the annual consumption of drugs per capita. Our country in 2005 spent €125 billion that is 7.8% of GDP [6].

The causes of this huge expenditure for acute and chronic diseases are multiple and complex. According to Voltaire, the physician’s art would be to entertain the patient until nature heals him. Today, instead, we are witnessing the opposite phenomenon: many conditions, once considered as physiological, can now be considered as subject to therapeutic intervention.
Normal phenomena such as shyness, baldness, apathy, ageing, fatigue and unhappiness are considered as conditions that can be cured: new diseases that must be treated, often in a costly way [7].

**Current challenges and future directions in medical science and health care policies and practice**

The framework of the current situation is the increase in the number of diagnoses that, in industrialised countries, has reached grotesque dimensions. It is believed that Homo Sapiens had about 40,000 among diseases, syndromes and disorders. Fortunately, there is a remedy for most diseases. Nowadays the pharmaceutical industry keeps investing in research; however, it spends more for marketing than for innovation. About a third of the revenues and a third of the staff are used only to sell medicines [8].

The issues discussed so far call for a profound reflection about the future of the medical science: a modern health care system will be sustainable only if prevention policies are developed, through the protection of the environment and the promotion of correct eating habits.

It is fundamental, after all, to highlight that - to proceed in this regard - it is necessary to consider the role that culture has always played in the perception that every single person has about taking care of himself/herself. The link between health and care is an interesting topic that is being currently considered by social studies: in particular, the influence that culture and society have on people and their way of keeping healthy is being investigated. Research that starts from the assumption that “culture, as a complex system, is a way of organizing individuals and the relationships that connect them” [9].

**References**

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