

Traditional Health Beliefs and Practices Among Lower Class Black Americans

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The medical belief system of lower class black Americans reflects their social, political and economic marginality in the larger society. A moderate life-style is regarded as the basis for good health with special emphasis on protecting one's body from cold, keeping it clean inside and out and maintaining a proper diet. Illnesses and other life events are classified as "natural" or "unnatural." Natural illnesses result from the effects of cold, dirt and improper diet on the body causing changes in the blood. A number of beliefs about blood and its functions have important clinical implications for the treatment of hypertension and venereal disease and for family planning. Natural illnesses also result from divine punishment and serve as an instrument of social control. Unnatural illnesses are the result of witchcraft and reflect conflict in the social network. It is believed that physicians do not understand and cannot effectively treat such illnesses, but a variety of traditional healers offer help to the victims. Physicians must elicit such beliefs if they are to interact effectively and sensitively with black patients. Social change is required, however, to eliminate the feelings of powerlessness at the root of many of the health problems of poor black Americans.

These white folks don' care nothin' 'bout you and me and they don' want to see us flerishin'. That's why so much of that medicine they always after us 'bout takin' is agains' us. These doctors ain' nothin' but white folks, too.^{1(p220)}

These words, spoken by a 78-year-old black woman to a black anthropologist, underscore a point made in an essay about the health beliefs and practices of American ethnic groups.² Chrisman and Kleinman state that members of such groups who "come into contact with orthodox medicine that differs significantly from their traditional practices will often react by ignoring the treatment prescribed, or misusing it, or complaining about the quality of the care they are getting."² The results, they note, are generally poor. Traditional medical systems frequently contain a supernatural, magical and moral component in explanations for and management of sickness, a component largely missing in

the more secular and increasingly more technical arena of biomedicine. This disparity between lay and professional explanations of health and sickness, further widened by barriers of race and class, underlies many instances of noncompliance and dissatisfaction with care.

In recent years clinicians and social scientists interested in these problems have used the heuristic device of distinguishing between *disease* and *illness*. Physicians diagnose and treat disease, the "malfunctioning or maladaptation of biologic and psychophysiologic processes in the individual," whereas patients experience illness, "personal, interpersonal and cultural reactions to disease and discomfort."³ Problems associated with disease are routinely noted on a patient's chart; those associated with illness, however, may or may not be recognized by a physician and, if so, may or may not be dealt with or made a part of the medical record.⁴⁻⁶ It has been suggested that the routine

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eliciting of a patient's explanatory model of illness uncovers areas of potential conflict and allows negotiation of treatment to occur.

My purpose here is to describe some traditional beliefs about health and illness widespread among members of the black lower class, to indicate how these reflect their life experiences in a culturally appropriate manner and to show that such beliefs are clinically relevant and should be discussed in a medical encounter.*

World View and Health Beliefs

OK, now, when I taken sick, when this lady did this to me, it was Sunday. Tuesday, I had this big old green plant, it was in my living room. When I went to bed that night I looked at my plant, I put the light out and I went upstairs to bed. The plant was green and pretty, big old plant. And that mornin' I came downstairs and it was brown, it had *cooked*, just that brown, overnight. They say if you got a green plant in your house the power will burn the plant up, but if you keep aputtin' plants in, green plants, it cannot get to you until it burn the plant up. Then it's really controllin' *you*, then. Can't no plant live in your house under that. Keep aburnin' the plants, [it'll] keep away from you.

MRS MARYA W, 1983
Personal Communication

At the time Mrs W got sick she had not heard that green plants can keep "the power" from humans and, so she believes, the fact that her only plant died allowed the power "sent" by an enemy to attack her. It would be difficult to imagine a more graphic example of a fearful view of the world—not only is there *power* about, but it can be harnessed and directed and sent into one's home to do harm. Her illness, she felt, was not "natural."

The way that many poor black persons experience their world is reflected in their use of the terms "natural" and "unnatural." All events, including illness, may be classified along these lines. It is a perception of reality inextricably bound up with religious belief, so that natural versus unnatural are closely allied with good versus evil or godly versus ungodly. Natural events take place in the world as God made it and as He intended it to be. In health terms one must take care of not only the body but the soul. "Natural" illnesses in this system may be caused either by failure to take care of the body or by sinful behavior. Such ideas are not foreign to physicians, though "sin" may not appear as an objective cue in the problem-oriented medical record.

"Unnatural" events, in contrast, are outside the world of nature and do not follow natural laws; by extension they are sometimes seen as the work of the Devil. They are frightening because by definition they are not amenable to the rules governing everyday life. They are based on the belief that there are persons with extra-

ordinary powers to change the course of natural events, powers that they may use for their own ends or hire out: if the result of their machinations is an illness, it is an illness no physician can cure. These ideas may be foreign indeed to physicians, who may view patients with such beliefs as deserving of a psychiatric consultation. They are more readily understood if viewed as a metaphor for a deep and abiding mistrust of others, of a belief that, given the chance, everyone will seek their own advantage.

Sociologic and anthropologic studies of the black lower class reveal just such a belief: that the world is a dangerous and unpredictable place where attack may come at any time from a variety of sources and where the only reasonable position is to be on guard. Poverty, racism and chronic unemployment have created an environment wherein a child learns early that adults cannot always be depended on as their resources are so slight that it is necessary to "go for yourself" to survive and to manipulate others so as not to be manipulated by them. The result is a hustle-or-behustled world where friendships are fragile, male-female relationships brittle and even relatives not always to be trusted as they, too, must do what they can to get by.^{1,10-16} In such an environment it is not surprising that many see the world as a hostile place where "exposure" leaves the body vulnerable to cold and damp, where God may "strike you down" for sinning and where an envious neighbor may "put something on you" by using evil magic. And it is not surprising that out-of-the-ordinary means are used for self-protection; attempts to control the environment by magic and religion are common where ordinary means are absent or unavailing.^{7,17-19}

Maintaining Health and Preventing Illness

I feel like it's the care that they take of themselves. That's what I think, I don't know. I feel like they exposes themselves too much, and don't take enough care of theirself like they should. That's one reason that I can get around and do things now at my age! Now I've worked hard all my life, ever since I started at ten years old. But otherwise I've taken care of myself. And I never was the goin' kind! I didn't work all day, and then goin' half of the night and all like that . . .^{18 (pp31-32)}

Mrs P, aged 82, also credited her long life and good health to the fact that she had always relied on her own herbal remedies, "my system ain't never been poisoned up by no medical doctor." The belief is that if people would use "mother wit" they could stay healthy almost indefinitely. The key word in staying well is moderation: a moderate and healthy life-style includes proper diet, rest and exercise. The body, if protected from extremes of heat and cold, adequately fed, kept clean inside and out, kept limber by work and exercise and properly rested, should remain free of most health problems. There is a special emphasis on monitoring the state of the blood, thought to mirror the state of the system, and on the processes of digestion and elimination.

Those at the extremes of age are recognized to be more susceptible to health problems and to require

*Information to be presented has been drawn from research by anthropologists, sociologists and folklorists on the black lower class; the medical literature; material from the folklore archives at the University of California at Berkeley and the Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore, UCLA, and ethnographic studies of black medical beliefs and practices. Special note should be made of the University of Miami's Health Ecology Project, a five-year study of the health beliefs and practices of 100 families from each of the five largest ethnic groups in Miami's inner city—southern blacks, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Bahamians and Haitians.⁷⁻⁹

special protection. Women, too, are felt to be constitutionally weak. They are especially prone to illness when experiencing vaginal blood loss, as the body is seen as "open" and weak at that time.

It is not enough to simply take care of the body, however; ideas about health maintenance clearly show the belief that the body, the soul and one's personal relationships must *all* be properly tended. Every adult is responsible for knowing how the body functions, when it is especially vulnerable and how it must be cared for; every adult is responsible for keeping his or her relationship with God in order, and every adult is responsible for not acting in a manner likely to engender angry or envious feelings in others. "Act right!" is as important as "Eat right!" in most traditional medical systems.^{2, 18, 20-23} There is little sympathy for a person who flagrantly breaks the rules, bodily, spiritually or socially: if one then gets sick, well, "you done done it to yourself!"¹⁸

Preventive measures also combine the practical, the magical and the religious: keeping the body clean, well-fed and warm will keep away certain illnesses—but so might wearing a string with nine knots around the appropriate part of the body, reciting a certain psalm, carrying a High John the Conquerer root in the pocket or burning a properly colored candle. Any city with a large black population has a candle shop where a variety of products are sold to help customers get what they want or need—candles, oils, incense, amulets and charms, aerosol sprays, powders, religious artifacts—all are available, along with booklets on their use to attract health, love, money or protection.^{7, 24-28}

Human nature being what it is, care is *not* always taken, of course—people stay out all night, drink too much, eat the wrong foods, fight with their neighbors, fail to say their prayers, forget to wear their protective charms—and illness occurs. Resultant symptoms may (from the view of orthodox medicine) wander confusingly from one area of causation to another. A stroke, for example, may be blamed on stress, impeded menstrual blood, eating the wrong foods or witchcraft. Folk diagnosis has as much to do with assessing in which areas of a victim's life care has not been taken as with the nature of the symptoms. A problem initially seen as natural may come to be seen as the result of evil magic if it fails to respond to appropriate treatment within a reasonable time.

Illness, whatever the cause, is viewed almost literally as an attack: all at once cold "enters" the body, God "strikes down" a sinner, the power creeps into a house, "put on" a victim by an enemy. Once the attack has taken place, the illness is spoken of as if it were a tangible presence in the body, something that x-ray films can "see." In some instances it can lurk undetected in a body for years, manifesting itself only as a person begins to weaken with advancing age. The cure may be instantaneous, so that the problem is described as "driven out" of or "taken off" the body. The idea of chronicity is therefore poorly developed and, in fact, most health problems are seen as curable if the

proper remedy, the right physician or a more powerful healer can be found—if not, God can cure anything should He so desire.

Natural Illnesses

Well, in other words . . . it's *exposure*, that you get sometime when you're young in your body. Through your system as you get older, it take effect . . . dampness and not takin' proper care of yourself. Goin' out in bad weather and rainy weather, you expose yourself. Pores are open. You're subject to takin' a complaint, in through the blood . . . kind of grows into the system, and as you get older, it works with you.^{18(p41)}

One of the first and most frequent answers to the question, Why do people get sick? has to do with the entrance of cold into the body. Other popular explanations are dirt, in and out of the body, and an injudicious diet. The impact of all of these may be assessed by examining their presumed effect on the blood. There is an extremely elaborate system of beliefs about the nature of blood and its functions, beliefs responsible for a wide range of self-treatment practices. Blood is seen to vary across a number of dimensions and is always in flux, responding to external and internal stimuli. Blood is spoken of as good or bad, clean or dirty, thick or thin, high or low and sweet or bitter. The extremes are dangerous and in a healthy body blood is not too high or too low, too thick or too thin and so forth. Many of the beliefs about blood to be described are found among white southerners as well, and there are strong parallels in the beliefs of immigrants to the United States from Haiti, Jamaica, the Bahamas and the Cape Verdean Islands.^{8, 20-22, 29, 30}

Cold as a Cause of Illness

Blood is believed to vary in its degree of thickness or thinness according to ambient temperature and relative age. The very young and the very old are believed to have thinner blood and thus are more vulnerable to illness. Normal blood should automatically thicken in winter to protect a person against acute and chronic problems associated with cold. It "thins down," sometimes with the aid of home remedies, as spring approaches, to ready the body for hot weather. Acute illnesses caused by cold include upper respiratory tract infections associated with increased mucus production, colds, flu, bronchitis, pneumonia and the like, and a disorder known as "quick TB," greatly feared by southern black and white women.³¹ Lillian A's physician said that she had chronic cardiac disease, but she was never quite convinced. She believed that her shortness of breath was caused by breathing in cold or damp air, which made her "wheeze":

Now, just like this cough I have, now I don't really feel that it's a cold. And yet I *know* it's cold in there, because the main reason of the coughing, I get that little lump of phlegm or mucus in my throat, and I have to cough until I can get it out. And of course I know that's cold in there.³⁵

She died of congestive heart failure not long after these remarks were made.

In later life, cold is blamed for the development of arthritis. The exposure in this instance may have taken place early in life without symptoms, but it is believed

that the cold and damp that have entered the body may "settle" in the joints. Such "old cold" will wait until a person is old and weak and has thinner blood, and then it will act:

Oh yeah, I have arthritis. Here they call it arthritis, but it ain't nothin' but rheumatism. See, I worked so long, I worked a long time, and the cold settled in my joints. Standin' in the cold catchin' the buses and things. And you know how much cold you accumulate.^{16(p122)}

Cold is seen as especially dangerous to women in the childbearing years. The uterus is believed to be "open" when vaginal bleeding is occurring, and menstruation and postpartum and postabortion bleeding are alike dangerous. Cold is believed to enter the body, already weakened by blood loss, at that time. The result is much like stopping up a sink: blood, clotted by the cold, backs up into the body, causing headache, stroke, elevated blood pressure or the oral hemorrhages of "quick TB." The fear of such eventualities underlies a common proscription against getting chilled, bathing, shampooing the hair, walking in the rain and so on, when vaginal bleeding is occurring.^{32,33}

No, I don't think you should bathe. When I was growin' up my girlfriend she died from bathin' during her menstruating period. They say it stops you, stops your womb up or something up there, the water does. She was taking a bath during her menstruating period and she died in the tub. Another reason I don't think you should be in too much water is you'll catch cold. You'll catch cold because your veins are open.^{17(p91)}

This woman's 18-year-old daughter reported that when she went into labor her mother insisted that she bathe and shampoo her hair, as she would not be able to do either again until after the cessation of postpartum bleeding. The exposure associated with cold-related problems is relatively easy to avoid: wear protective clothing when the temperature is low and avoid cold air and water if bleeding vaginally.

Dirt as a Cause of Illness

If the system's not clean, throws you into a deep sickness. Everybody's blood's not clean . . . When spring comes, birds start mating. Fishes in the water start mating. The sap is rising and impurities start rising too. If your system's defiled, why you're liable to come up with *anything!*^{18(pp38-39)}

A dirty body is a sick body. Blood is the vehicle through which "impurities" (vaguely associated with "germs") circulate through the system. A body becomes "defiled" by failure to bathe, impeded menses, irregular bowel movements and sexual excess. The belief that a body must be "cleaned out" to stay healthy is by no means confined to ethnic medical systems, of course, as the most cursory viewing of television advertising shows. According to one national survey, two thirds of the adult population of the United States believe that a daily bowel movement is necessary for good health.³⁴

Just as mucus in a body is associated with cold, impurities are associated with heat—fever, inflammation and skin eruptions. The latter, ranging from measles to syphilitic chancre to skin cancer, represents "something in the body trying to come out." It is

thought dangerous to interfere with any sort of natural process or with any attempt of a body to heal itself. Cold is believed to suppress a rash, causing it to "go in" on the body with devastating results.

The most common result of the concern with dirt, however, is a preoccupation with the gastrointestinal tract and constant monitoring of what goes in and what comes out. There is a dependence—sometimes an overdependence—on laxatives, which begins at birth. "I don't worry about my grandbaby being constipated. I puts a spoonful of that children's laxative in her bottle every night!" (personal communication, Odelia K, 1982). Many women also believe that "the little red hives" need to "come out" on a new infant to rid its system of the accumulated filth of the intra-uterine environment, thought filthy because the mother did not menstruate during pregnancy. If hives do not appear a child may sicken and die, and catnip tea is often given to hasten the eruption.^{17,31,35} One infant brought into a Michigan pediatrics clinic was admitted to hospital for weight loss at 3 weeks of age. One reason for his failure to thrive was poor caloric intake due to the several bottles of catnip tea he was being given every day. He had not yet broken out in the little red hives, his mother said, and she was concerned about his health (Nancy Spates, MD, Resident in Pediatrics, Graduate Medical Education, Inc, Lansing, Mich, personal communication).

It is widely believed that the main purpose of menstruation is to rid the body of dirty and excess blood, and any interference with normal menstrual pattern is frightening. Diminished flow is of concern, "I guess I get nervous because I wonder where the flow is going. It might back up," said one woman in the Miami study. "Where is the bad blood going to be stored?" asked another.³⁶ Increased menstrual flow is just as much a problem because that can weaken the body. For these reasons many black women have very negative views of contraceptive methods that in any way change menstrual patterns.^{32,33,37} It is "not natural" to interfere with the body's attempts to clean itself.

As mentioned, there is a belief that the uterus is open during the menses to allow all the tainted blood to escape. It follows that many women believe that they are "safe" for unprotected intercourse at midcycle, when the uterus is "closed." Such ideas, combined with a very powerful cultural prohibition against intercourse during menstruation (81% of all black women in a Detroit prenatal clinic sample and 91% of the teenagers in the sample subscribe to this taboo) are bound to contribute to unwanted pregnancies.³⁷

Folk ideas about venereal disease are also associated with dirt in the body, often referred to as "bad blood." In studies conducted in prenatal clinics in two Michigan cities, many black women, though generally aware of the role of sexual contact in contracting venereal disease, also believed it can be caused simply by being dirty: failing to bathe after a menstrual period, wearing dirty underclothing, living in dirty surroundings or having sex with too many partners, none necessarily

infected. Many also believed that the Pap smear is a test for venereal disease, and some had been insulted at the suggestion that they have one done.^{32,37,38} The Miami study revealed similar misunderstandings between black women and their physicians on the causes and proper treatment of salpingitis—"pus tubes" in the folk system—believed by the women to be the result of dirty or "poisoned" blood.⁹

Prevention of health problems caused by dirt has to do with keeping the body clean (and cleaned out) by bathing, the constant use of laxatives, avoiding behaviors that might stop up vaginal bleeding and sexual moderation. In the springtime there may be an additional "cleanup": additional laxatives may be taken, as well as sulfur and molasses (thought to open the pores so that impurities can escape), and poke greens eaten to purify the blood. Here, too, moderation must be practiced: "You can't take a blood tonic all the time; it would work in the blood too forcible, strip things out that you didn't want out."¹⁸ One woman carefully hides "liver" pills in her husband's oatmeal each spring; he just as carefully fishes them out when she is not looking.

Improper Diet as a Cause of Illness

I used to have the high blood pressure but the doctor says I don't have it no more, so I quit taking the pills. They made me sick anyway. Now when I feels woozy I just takes me a pinch of epsom salts.

SADIE W. 1982
Personal Communication

"*High blood.*" The diet is instrumental in causing two conditions that have a good deal of clinical significance, "high blood" and "low blood." The terms high and low may refer to either the amount of blood in the body or a shift in its location—that is, "high blood" may be too *much* blood or it may be that a normal amount of blood is present in the body but has suddenly shot up into the head. Changes in blood volume and shifts in location can result from improper dietary practices or emotional shock or both. High and low blood are acute conditions with recognizable symptoms. They are usually treated with short-term regimens of dietary manipulation and home remedies. Unfortunately, they are often terminologically confused with high and low blood *pressure*.^{8,9,17-20,22,39,40} Arizona women defined high blood pressure as "too *much* blood, the blood goin' to your heart, to your brain or somethin'," and as "an overflowin' of blood, a clogging, from eatin' too much and gettin' too fat, the blood goes up to your head too fast." As usual it is a person's own fault: "But you know you can help that yourself, just don't eat all that rich food."¹⁸

The sorts of foods that are believed to cause these changes in the blood may be described simply as "too rich," or they are those red in color—beets, carrots, grape juice, red wine and red meat, especially pork.^{2,8,17,18,41} These are usually referred to as "blood builders." In parts of the South they are said to make the blood too "sweet," as well as cause a rise in "pressure," however that is defined.^{20,40}

Symptoms of high blood (pressure) include headache, dizziness, spots before the eyes and "falling out," a term used for sudden collapse. Such symptoms indicate that an abnormal amount of blood has reached the head and, if not "brought down," it may lead to stroke or death. In Miami, Bahamians refer to "falling out" episodes as "blacking out," and Haitians as "indisposition." Weidman believes that "falling out" is a true culture-bound syndrome, a seizure-like disorder often diagnosed as epilepsy in health care settings. From an outsider's view, "falling out" may be psychogenic in origin; to an insider, it results from a state of the blood or, if this does not respond to treatment, to a hex.¹⁹

Treatments for high blood include foods, herbal teas and other remedies that have the properties of "thinning" the blood, "cutting" it or "bringing it down" to where it should be. Some of these serve to open the pores to let the excess be sweated out; others open the bowels to eliminate it in that fashion. Menstruation helps to get rid of excess blood for women and, if flow is diminished, it is thought that a rise in blood pressure might result.³⁶

Just as red items symbolically "build" blood, many of the treatments to "lower" blood are white or colorless. In the South many herbal remedies are used to treat high blood, sometimes referred to as "bitters," as they neutralize the "too sweet" condition of blood associated with the problem. Such exotica as bullfrog urine mixed with bits of garlic and onion have also been reported as antihypertensive.^{20,22,30,39,40,42} In urban areas where wild plants are not available (not to mention the dearth of bullfrogs) treatments are more likely to be astringent items such as vinegar, lemon juice, olive or pickle juice, garlic, epsom salts and the like.

The following anecdote shows a misunderstanding that arose when a physician made a diagnosis of high blood pressure, which the 64-year-old black patient mistook as "high blood" pressure: Arnella L woke up one morning unable to see and unable to use her right arm; an ambulance was called and she was taken to a hospital that provides health care to indigent persons. There she was examined by "one of them student doctors" who said that she had had a "light stroke." The hospital was full so she was sent home in the care of relatives. First, however, she was provided with a bottle of pills that she was told she would always have to take. "Now that don't make no sense," was her response to that directive (although she did not express this belief to the physician) and the medicine was discarded the same evening without a single dose being taken. Instead, she embarked on a series of treatments that she—and her neighbors—thought more appropriate to her problem, blood that had "boiled up in the brains" from eating too much rich food. She slept sitting up for several nights, the better to allow the blood to drain back down into her body. She began a nine-day regimen of drinking a solution of honey and vinegar in hot water. The minister of her church came to pray for her to complete the cure. She reported that she "felt the stroke leave" her body when he placed

his hand on her forehead. She also instituted preventive measures on the advice of an elderly aunt:

The 15th of February I was right at death's door. My blood pressure was run up so I couldn't see nothin', couldn't do nothin' but feel my way. My auntie said, 'Well, honey, your sight will come back, it will eventually come back. But you drink you a teaspoon of vinegar in some water and that will prevent another stroke. And keep your hand rubbed in it, in white vinegar. Take a teaspoonful of that vinegar in water, that'll thin your blood, too, that'll prevent your havin' another stroke.'^{18(p35)}

Commented her niece bitterly, "The doctors didn't do nothin' for her, that's for sure." It is not surprising that southern blacks are reported overrepresented for non-compliance with diet and medication for hypertension in the ambulatory clinics of Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital.⁹

"Low blood."

Darlin', low-blood pressure is not enough blood to go through. They have to give you iron, they give you iron pills, iron tonic to build the blood. Then they give you food to eat, tell you to eat beets or liver; some of 'em, they'll tell you to drink wine, red wine.^{15(p30)}

"Low blood" is conceptually allied with anemia but may be terminologically confused with low blood pressure. It is "sort of like when you're anemic, your blood is low from not eating the right food."⁴¹ The wrong sorts of foods are too many pickles or olives, too much vinegar, lemon juice and garlic and not enough red meat. It may also be caused by taking "high blood" remedies too long. It was this belief that caused Arnella to throw away her antihypertensive pills; to her it would be folly to take such medicine for life.

The symptoms of "low blood" pressure are weakness, lassitude, fatigue and, again, "falling out." Treatments are the ingestion of red foods and beverages seen as blood building, as listed above. These in turn must not be taken for too long, lest the low blood be again transformed into high blood.

In a public clinic in Michigan a 62-year-old man came in for follow-up care for hypertension, which had been under good control with a diuretic for over a year. At this visit his blood pressure was significantly elevated; on questioning he said that he had not taken his medication since his last visit a month earlier. A review of his records showed that a routine complete blood count was done at the previous visit, and the leukocyte count had been low. A physician told him that his "blood count" was down and that it would be checked again at the next visit. The patient interpreted that as "low blood" and believed that his faithful taking of the diuretic had *indeed* "brought down" his blood, damaging his health in the process. The physician had not heard of the entity "low blood" and the patient did not know that low blood, low blood pressure and low blood count were not all equivalent terms. A discussion (with pictures) of the difference between the cellular components of the blood and blood pressure ensued, and the patient promised to begin taking his medicine again.

Improper Behavior as a Cause of Illness

So many time the Lord get vexed with us when we do things. Like sickness, I would say sometimes is a whup to us, just like whuppin' a child. So many times we have to be taught a lesson, a sickness sometime bring us down to make us serve the Lord's will. Sometime we don't know to say 'Thank the Lord,' and we don't know how to praise the Lord and thank Him for things He did for us. You can invite it in yourself. If you live a real good life for God, it's just like children: if you got good children, you don't have to punish 'em. Sickness and different things comes like a whuppin', a reminder. The Lord would heal all the peoples if they would ask the Lord to heal 'em. But the people, they forget God.^{15(pp33-34)}

It has been estimated that more than 90% of poor black people are church affiliated and religion is a very important component of ideas about health and illness. Remarks about everything from causes of health problems to the best ways to cure them are often reinforced with "It's in the Bible" or "The Bible tells you that." The relationship with God (a stern but loving parent) is seen as a very personal one, and He is thought to keep close watch on the behavior of all.

It is believed that God can and does punish transgression with illness.^{2,20,22,23} The assessment of a given health problem as divine punishment is probably based on feelings as to whether or not a person (or a family) *deserves* such an occurrence, not on any particular constellation of symptoms. However, the problem is usually sudden and dramatic or something visible, incurable and long-lasting (or both), giving a sinner time to contemplate his or her misdeeds. Such illnesses have been called *personalistic*, in that a victim is not randomly attacked but has been selected by some sentient outside force for reasons known and understood by the social group.⁴³ Belief in such punishment is probably found among all social classes and ethnic groups, though ideas about what sorts of behavior merit such action differ. Greed, failure to share and lack of charity rank high on the list of punishable behaviors among the black lower class—a powerful means of social control.

Infants and children are often the innocent victims of their parents' misdeeds and parental sin is commonly blamed for deformity, seizure disorders or retardation. If the external world is seen as threatening to an adult, the intrauterine environment is certainly no haven for a fetus, trapped and helpless, dependent on the mother-to-be's behavior during her pregnancy. The idea that an unborn child can be "marked" by its mother's actions is still widely believed, and the belief that God will so mark an infant if the mother misbehaves serves to curb undesirable acts.^{21,33,38} If a pregnant woman sees a crippled person and laughs, for example, God may "put the same thing" on her infant to remind her to be more charitable in future. The sight of the crippled child is a constant reminder to her (and everyone else in the neighborhood) as long as she lives.

As God punishes He also heals, and religious belief can be a powerful aid for recovering from illness. A dramatic example is the case of a 68-year-old black woman whose postoperative course from partial colec-

tomy for resection of carcinoma required no pain medication whatsoever. She reported that she had minimal discomfort because a bright band of angels stood around her bed, protecting her.⁴⁴ A patient's minister can also be a useful ally if problems of a religious nature arise in a clinical situation.⁴⁵ In those instances wherein persons feel that their problems result from their sinful behavior, irrespective of the orthodox explanation for the problem, it should be recognized that a patient may have social and religious fences to mend as well as a medical regimen to follow.

Unnatural Illnesses

I was in church one day and I had the headache and I didn't have my medication with me. So I asked the usher to get me some aspirin from somebody, so she got 'em from this lady, I won't call her name. And when she give me the aspirin the headache went away but I took sick to the stomach. And I just kept on gettin' sick to the stomach, sick to the stomach. Then I just got where I couldn't *do* nothin' for myself, and I got to where I just got down in bed, couldn't get up. And I got so sick I just got almost too weak to talk, and I couldn't eat, I couldn't stand the smell of food. 'Til one time I had a vision like, that this lady came to me with two pills in a pan, that was in the vision I had, she was shakin' these two pills in this pan. Said, 'if you don't take 'em, these pills, you're gonna die!' And I told my husband then, I said, 'This lady came to me with these two pills, I remember, that's what I taken in church, two aspirin from this same lady,' and I said, 'seem like sumpin' is wrong and I don't know what it is.' So my sister-in-law told me that he'd better take me somewhere, that I probably *would* die! Well, *she* knew who to go to, cause this same lady had did sumpin' [to her], causin' her to have bats comin' into her house, this lady had did that to her. And when I told her about this vision I had, she say, 'Yes, that lady is doin' sumpin' to her, so you better get her to somebody.'

MRS MARYA W, 1983
Personal Communication

Marya believes that a woman "poisoned" her because she wanted her husband. From an outsider's view, her symptoms might have resulted from acute situational stresses because at the time she took to her bed everything in her life seemed to have gone wrong. In a period of a few months she had been injured at work and laid off; she was unable to keep up her mortgage payments and was evicted from her home; her parents were divorced and her alcoholic father moved in with the family; her second husband discovered that he was not divorced from his first wife, refused to legalize the situation and became impotent; her oldest son sustained permanent brain damage from the use of angel dust, and her oldest daughter, 16, announced that she was pregnant and was going to quit school. Small wonder that she had headaches. Small wonder that she believed "the power" had entered her home, frying houseplants and generally causing mayhem. She had been brought up to believe that those who wish you ill can "do something to you" by magical means and that those persons are numerous. The personification of impersonal forces enabled her to identify her problems as "hoodoo" and to take action, however foolish that action might seem to a middle-class observer.

The use of magic for manipulating life events is

common where the environment is seen as hostile and dangerous and ungiving, and where people have little control over what happens in their lives.^{19,26,46-48} "Unnatural" illnesses are terribly frightening because they are outside nature; ordinary people, including physicians, *especially* physicians, are unable to deal with them effectively. It is commonly said, in fact, that one symptom of an unnatural illness is that "the more you go to the doctor the sicker you get." One explanation is that going to a doctor "aggravates" the power causing the illness.⁴⁹ Charms and spells are used to control the behavior of others: to win love, keep a spouse from straying, take someone's lover from them or avenge a slight from a neighbor. Problems of love and envy are the reasons given for most of the reports of hexing behavior, and the abnormal "control" of a victim causes physical or behavioral changes (or both). Reports of persons who believe that witchcraft is at the root of their health problems have appeared in the clinical literature in the past few years.⁵⁰⁻⁵⁸

Reported symptoms of magical illness range from pseudocyesis to headache, but most can be divided into two broad categories, gastrointestinal and behavioral. In most instances it is believed that the fix or hex is administered in a victim's food or drink, and it is often referred to as "poison." Snakes, frogs or lizards may be introduced into the body in the form of eggs or powder, which hatch or reconstitute themselves and take up their abode in a victim's blood, stomach or head. The thought of eating or drinking something evil that can then literally exist in the body must be psychologically devastating. Many blacks who believe in witchcraft are very careful about where and with whom they eat, and in extreme cases may eat no one's cooking but their own. Loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, food that does not taste right, diarrhea or "falling off" (weight loss, especially unexplained weight loss)—any sort of gastrointestinal problem that does not quickly respond to treatment—may be interpreted as unnatural, especially if there is conflict in a victim's personal relationships. Marya W's life was already troubled when she accepted two aspirin from a lady at church, and her benefactor had already shown ill will toward members of Marya's family and willingness (so it was perceived) to use evil means to express it.

Any sort of behavior that is out of the ordinary, ranging from inability to carry out usual tasks to outright mania, is also frequently interpreted as the result of magic. The belief that animals can be introduced into and survive in the body has a behavioral parallel in the fear that a victim of magic can be made to behave like an animal. One woman reported that a man she knew had been bewitched and had "howled like a dog 'til he died"; someone who hates a pregnant woman may curse her so that her infant will bark like a dog.^{18,33} A number of observers have noted that mentally ill black patients frequently believe they are the victims of hex.^{25,49,52,54,59,60} Nearly half of the patients interviewed at one mental health facility "attributed their own illnesses to the effects of malign

magic perpetrated by a close relative or friend who often figured prominently in the presenting symptomatology of acutely psychotic patients."⁶¹ The problem is to differentiate between those patients whose symptoms have been caused by *fear* of a hex⁵⁵ and those whose symptomatology of mental illness is taking a culturally appropriate form.

Almost any health problem may come to be seen as "unnatural" if it does not respond to ordinary treatment, or if a physician does not seem to know the cause of a problem. A physician does not have the power to remove the results of a spell, as the spell was put on by someone with out-of-the-ordinary abilities. Only a healer with "the power" can take off an unnatural symptom, remove poison from the body, drive the magical snake from a vein. Unfortunately, a person with the power to take off may also, for a price or on a whim, be both willing and able to put things on as well.^{8,19,27,59}

Traditional Healers

Unnatural sickness, doctors can't do nothin' for it, y'know. OK, for instance I know *this* story, that my grandmother was rooted by a woman over her own husband, my grandmother's husband. And this lady had did sumpin' to her so she had a *sore* on her leg, you see, and this sore didn't never *heal!* And she went to the doctor, she went different places, and they couldn't do *nothin'* for her! It was a open sore, open through the wall, so she decided to go to a root man and this man told her that somebody had put a *root* on her . . . and he gave my grandmother some kind of special *salve*. What it was I don't know, he gave her sumpin' to *rub* on it, keep puttin' on it, bathin' in it. And she did it. And sho 'nuff, right before everybody's eyes a snake crawled out of it. And they say it was a snake, whether it was a baby snake, big snake, I don't know. I remember this story when I was little, and I couldn't forget it, couldn't get it out of my mind every time somebody mention roots to me. She said it *crawl* outa her sore, crawled outa that opening that was in her *leg*, crawl right clean outa there. And they killed it. They was hittin' at it and it just disappear, just like black magic, like Voodoo or whatever.

GERALDINE B, 1983
Personal Communication

There is no lack of alternative healing sources for a black patient who is alienated from the orthodox medical system, or whose problem will not or cannot respond to orthodox care. There is a great variety of traditional healers available and they may be used serially, in tandem with or instead of biomedical professionals. Their treatments may be public or private, religious or secular, reasonably priced or outrageously expensive. Some may use "the power" (and their clients' fear of that power) to manipulate and extort.* They include out-and-out charlatans and talented therapists. We have very little information about their practices; they tend to be wary because of licensing laws. It is probable that successful healers share the world view of their clients (or understand it well enough to use it in counseling and advising), make diagnoses that seem appropriate to that world view and use treatments that both practically and symbolically put a patient back into balance physically, socially and spiritually. Returning to the disease-illness dichotomy,

*References 1, 8, 19, 20, 25-27, 42, 49, 56, 57, 59, 62-67.

such healers "may or may not provide effective treatments for any particular disease; their chief contribution is their recognition and management of the life problems that illness poses, including personal, marital, family, work, financial and related difficulties that frequently accompany sickness."⁷²

When Marya W traveled 50 miles to see the Reverend X, who had successfully removed the bats from her hexed sister-in-law's house, he took a history of recent events in her life and agreed that the problem was caused by the aspirin given to her in church. These, he said, had "thinned out" the lining of her stomach until it was like tissue paper; if she had not come when she did, she would soon have died. His treatment seems both common sense and psychologically apt: he (1) gave her a "prescription" to take for seven days that consisted of a mixture of white wine, white milk and the white of egg to "build up" the stomach lining; (2) gave her incense and candles to burn to drive the evil from her home; (3) gave her salts for a series of ritual "cleansing" baths, to remove the last vestiges of evil from her body; (4) told her to sleep with a Bible under the mattress, opened to the 23rd Psalm, and (5) strongly suggested that she find another church to attend. At the end of her seven-day treatment she was cured of her symptoms, though she believes that the poison somehow eroded the lining of her stomach so that she will be more vulnerable to stomach cancer in the future.

Conclusions

There is a viable system of traditional beliefs among many lower class black Americans that can affect every aspect of their interactions with the professional system of medicine. It is a model of health and illness that, although there may be overlapping vocabulary, is often strikingly different from the model of orthodox biomedicine. Failure to elicit a patient's understanding of an illness, its cause and how he or she believes it is properly treated can result in anger, frustration and noncompliance. Failure of physicians to include questions about the life-style of patients, presence or absence of a viable support system or their concerns about the effects of illness on daily life may send them to a traditional healer who *does* understand that such matters are important. Listening to a patient's view of health problems in an interested and sympathetic manner will elicit areas of possible conflict but also beliefs that may be strengthened and reinforced. The belief that a moderate life-style promotes good health and long life and that persons must actively maintain their own health can be used to advantage in health education programs. Others, of course, have much more potential for engendering practices seen as dangerous from the vantage point of biomedicine, as when the notion of "high blood" leads to misunderstanding of a condition like hypertension, with its high prevalence among black Americans. Even here, however, both patient and practitioner are interested in the body and how it functions, and the discovery of differential ex-

planations provides the basis for discussion and negotiation of treatment.

The category of unnatural illnesses cannot be dealt with so easily, however; because it does not exist in the scientific model of disease, there is little or no basis for negotiation. Educational problems will not eliminate a belief in hexing, reflecting as it does an attempt to control life experiences by those who, in fact, have control over nothing. Such negative life experiences are *not* going to disappear in the near future: the Center for the Study of Social Policy reports that in measures of income, poverty and unemployment, disparities between black and white Americans have not lessened since 1960, and in some instances have worsened (Slade M, Biddle W: "For many blacks the gap remains," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1983, sect E, p 22). "The ultimate cause of the curse lies in economic, racial and political inequality, not in the hands of the sorcerer. It lies in unemployment, poverty and negative self-image, not in a bag of roots and graveyard dirt. It rests in a social environment so hostile that the individual would be a fool not to believe in the evil intentions of others. The real cure lies not in medications or mojos, then, but in a restructuring of American society which would truly result in equality for all."⁵⁹

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