Redefining Health

**Health:** the state of being free from illness or injury.

Google

**Health:** the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit; especially: freedom from physical disease or pain
- the condition of being well or free from disease
- the overall condition of someone's body or mind
- the condition or state of something

Merriam-Webster Online

**Health:** “a desired state, a prescribed state, an ideological position. A term replete with value judgements, hierarchies, and blind assumptions that speak as much about power and privilege as they do about well-being.”

Against Health, p.1-2

**Health:** “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

*The World Health Organization (WHO), 1946*

The most accurate definition of health that I have found, the one that matches what I perceive health to be, was written in 1946 by the World Health Organization. It discusses health in all facets of an individual's life, not just the absence of illness or disease. Unfortunately, I do not believe that any of the definitions, but one, define health in the western world. Unfortunately, the definition that I believe rings most true in the United States is the definition provided in Against Health. After reading all of the books this semester I have developed my own working definitions for the different facets of health that are relevant in the social world of the United States. Physical health correlates with thinness, beauty, and power. Mental health correlates with anti-depressants and meeting physical health demands. Social well-being correlates to positive activity on social media sites and meeting physical health demands.

Today, we are teaching ourselves how to be healthy by the standards of the western world. We see individuals who are formed to meet western society’s definition of health on TV
and in magazines. We see sad people made happy with intense fitness programs and medication. We see thin and toned individuals on the cover of almost every magazine advertising their get thin quick workouts and dietary guides. The cover exclaims, “Put that cupcake down!”, as if to say that now is your chance to turn your life around and finally attempt to live up to the standards that society has set for you. You flip through the pages only to see more people who have accomplished what you have only attempted. Their smiling faces are their trophies. They are healthy, they are accepted by society and therefore, they are happy. Writing all of this has brought be back to my favorite movie from 8th grade, Legally Blonde. I could probably quote the entire movie but the following quote is one that pertains to the topic at hand. “Exercise gives you endorphins, endorphins make you happy, happy people just don’t shoot their husbands.” So does Elle Woods have it right? Will exercise lead me to the state of ‘health’ that society envisons? And will that ‘health’ eventually lead me to happiness? I don’t think it is that easy, but boy is it made to look easy.

I have decided that it is necessary for each individual to decide what makes them happy in order to find a balance between physical, mental, and social health. This decision is not so easy. Every attempt you make at paving your own path and change your values of health, someone or something might convince you to retreat to the safety of society’s values. Now, I there are some serious outliers to this stance; individuals who are not necessarily capable of defining health for themselves. Most of the discussion above relates to the behavior's of individuals who are targeted by the media in westernized societies.

“American society promoted a definition of health based on an unattainable ideal, one that made no room for suffering, aging, dying or other natural processes.”

-Against Health
Mental & Social Health are often at odds with Physical Health

One of the really interesting things that I had never really thought in depth about was how we often put our physical and mental health at odds with one another. Against health discussed the enjoyment individuals receive from smoking. These individuals are extremely aware of the adverse effects that smoking can have on their physical health, but yet they continue to smoke. Why? Smoking might have a negative effect on their physical health and could subject them to cancer and potentially an early death, but smoking is not all about negative effects, there are also many positives that come along with this habit. These individuals increase their mental health as well as their social health. The are doing something that makes them happy, while surrounding themselves by a community who shares their feelings on smoking. Relationships are formed during smoking breaks. That fact is evident even here at St. Olaf. These individuals have chosen their mental and social health over their physical health and society criticizes them because of it.

For the past 15 years, I have been an avid soccer player, but it wasn’t until after reading Against Health that I really began to think of my personal health, mentally, socially and physically, in relation to soccer. To be honest, soccer isn’t physically healthy. By stepping onto the field for every practice and game, I am making the decision to put my body on the line in order to do what I love. I do this because I am surrounded by a community that supports me socially and mentally. In this case I am putting my mental and social health above my physical health, just like the smokers do.

On the surface, society would disagree with me when I say that playing soccer itself is decreasing my physical health, they might even say that my physical health is increased by this activity. But, an asterix must be placed next to ‘increased physical health’ if soccer is going to be placed in that category. Throughout my soccer career I have subjected myself to multiple ankle
sprains, muscle tears, and concussions. All of which have set me down a path for an increased risk of arthritis and joint replacements. I could have quit, but then I would be giving up that was so important to me.

So what's the real difference between smoking and soccer? I am aware that there is a big difference between cancer and getting a hip replacement, but with technology advancing at the rate it is these concerns could be non-existent eventually. So why not smoke? Why not play soccer? By participating in either activity the individual is choosing to place their mental and social health above their physical health. One individual is looked down on society, while the other is often praised. Something is wrong here. There is a difference between living the best quality of life according to your own standards and just merely surviving by societies standards.

**What does medicine have to say about all of this?**

“As long as ‘survival’ is accepted as a goal, a treatment for cancer may seem successful if those who receive it live, say, an average of six months longer than those who do not. However, the patients and the physicians and nurses engaged in their day to day care weren’t always convinced that such ‘survival’ entails an improvement. Six months in and out of a hospital, with a disintegrating body, with pain from both disease and the treatment, may well lead to more suffering than relief.”

- *the body multiple*

“In medical practice disease may be the central object of concern, but it is not the only one that is relevant.”

- *the body multiple*

Many of these books have opened my eyes to the medical socialization process and how that changes from country to country. I have realized how truly blessed I am to have the opportunity to pursue my passions with my main roadblock being myself. In a *Heart for the Work* it was evident that healthcare is something that has to be fought for not just in 3rd world
countries, but even in the most developed countries. It was so refreshing to see the amount of faith that the Malawian patients had in their doctors, even if it was occasionally wrongly placed. This faith was also placed in the Ayurvedic practitioners like Dr. Mistry, who strays so far from biomedical practices that his techniques originally seemed like quackery. But, his patients had faith in him. As I read more of his story I began to see how his opinion gained so much respect from his patients. He listened, he touched, he advised, and if necessary he prescribed. This checklist seems to be somewhat foreign to many biomedical doctors. Biomedical doctors listen, but often behind the screen of their computers; they touch, but only if they have to; they advise, but do not practice preventative medicine; and they prescribe whenever possible. Now, it is obviously the case that not all doctor’s are like this, but once a doctor has lost passion for medicine, for the betterment of his patients, this checklist can be used as a safety net.

After reading *Better* and the *Checklist Manifesto* I thought to myself, “Great! Gawande is aware of the flaws in our medical system and he is doing his best to bring them to light.” At this point my faith in our current medical system was still somewhat intact. After reading *Better than Well* and *Against Health*, I really began to question my conceptions of biomedicine. Throughout my entire life, I had never once questioned the motives of our healthcare system. I was content in my ignorance about their ongoings, but after reading these books my faith in our medical system began to diminish. I was introduced to the bureaucracy that is medicine by Tom and I have never been able to look at it the same. Isn’t the goal of medicine to make people better?

One of the more frightening realizations that I came to this semester dealt with pharmaceutical companies. I had never realized, or cared to think about how much of an impact that they have in the world. I began to question whose backpocket the pharmaceutical companies had their hands in. Is it the doctor’s, the health care administration’s, both? Pharmaceutical companies have taken the reigns on making medicine an industry and they are
profiting from it. I question their motives to finding a cure for diseases. I wonder if they are simply looking for the next best drug. For example a drug that alleviates symptoms, but must be taken daily. With a drug like this the pharmaceutical companies will be making an extremely large profit, but if a cure for some disease is found and medication is no longer necessary what would happen to the pharmaceutical companies.

“For if someone finds a drug, and preferably, that’s important as well, and they’re working on it, a genetic marker that indicates who’s prone to atherosclerosis and should take the drug, well, then it’s finished. Done and over with. No more vascular surgery. Or almost.”

- the body multiple

I am anxious to see what would happen in this case. To me it seems like the current goal of most pharmaceutical companies is to create a drug that the target population will feel that they need and that will be continuously consumed. Like Prozac. Prozac is the perfect drug because it is in high demand by society, and if our society wants it, it is safe to say that eventually most societies will want it. We lead competitive lives, and anything that will help us get ahead will be in high demand. We have become the consumers of health care industry. One could say that pharmaceutical companies are feeding off of our competitive nature. Is it the drugs themselves or our faith in the drugs that gives them power?

“Patients used to seek healthcare and now the medical industrial complex seeks patients.”

“You market a treatment by convincing doctors and patients to diagnose the illness that your drug or procedure treats.”

-Against Health

Although I have become more skeptical of our current medical system, I would like to acknowledge there are healthcare professionals who are working around the clock in an attempt to deindustrialize health and focus on what is most important, the patient.
the body multiple really was the best book to end the semester with because its applications are endless. Just like atherosclerosis, medicine is “more than one, less than many.” There is more than one way to treat a patient, more than one way to enact a disease, more than one way become medically socialized, more than one way than way to be happy, and more than one way to be healthy. There is no perfect formula to health or to medicine. All we can do is make the most of what we have, strive for more, and listen to the world around us.

Random Thoughts

I found out that defining normal is an extremely difficult task, but yet we still try. We attempt to define normal so that we may rise above it, because there is nothing worse than being ‘normal’.

I discovered the importance of cultural relativism. No culture is better than another at raising their children, being happy, etc. They are just different, they use different scales and have different values. This is even true in medicine and was evident in Our Babies, Ourselves, A Heart for the work, and the articles about ayurveda. How do we know that we have the ‘best’ if we do not take the time to explore what else is out there? We don’t have to look far; we could look across the street, across town, across the oceans, but we have to look.

“Medicine is a major institution of social control.”

-Against Health

“When it comes to women, all standards of beauty are oppressive.”

“To lose weight and get a new haircut is to become a better person. Her physical appearance is an expression of who she is.”

-Better than well

The more I write, the more I figure out that I have so much more to learn. We have started to weave a neverending web of knowledge. I look forward to expanding it.