

What is medicine?

Paul Unschuld (Translated by Karen Reimers).
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We are often advised not to judge a book by its cover. On reading the title, 'What is medicine?' my first thoughts were: another one! In this instance, Paul Unschuld's, *What is medicine?* Western and Chinese approaches to healing, the adage's injunction remains intact.

Paul Unschuld, a historian with a keen interest in medicine and healing offers an interpretation that is too often ignored or just not offered to proponents of medicine, Western or Eastern. Rather than offer the reader a chronological account of events on the development of medicine in the West and China, Unschuld turns the question around. He does not seek to explore a history of ideas in medicine but about ideas in history. A thesis of this kind seeks to contextualize the idea of what medicine is and what medicine is like in different places in different times. By making this clear from the outset, one gets the view that the author is not concerned with the morphology of medicine. He wants to know about medicine as a human production, which he relates to social, political and philosophical ideas circulating at the time. He asks a simple question and not unlike the text, we know as the *Su Wen*, the response is a complex one. Thus, he asks such questions as, why has different kinds of medicine existed over the centuries in different cultures. Are there parallels between the different kinds of medicine? Another way of saying this is to ask, why these ideas in this place or culture at this time? In approaching his task in this manner, we are then left wondering what we mean by alternative and complementary medicine.

Here is one example how Unschuld situates a simple idea in history. It comes from antiquity and forms part of the network of assumptions that guides what he calls our model image for

understanding the body. In exploring medical ideas from Greek antiquity, he identifies a notion with which we are familiar: self-healing. This is not to say that the Chinese were not aware that some illnesses get better without medical intervention. Rather, Unschuld is more concerned with apprehending the significance and meaning of such an idea as to why it has persisted for so long. Unschuld notes that the Greeks endlessly debated the reasons for self-healing. Offering an understanding of the times, Unschuld cogently argues that the idea of self-healing represents the view that the body has a self-interest, an innate capacity to pull itself out of a crisis and move towards harmony. The organism single-mindedly strives for its own well-being. As an organism the body has an interest to self regulate, an idea based on the model image of a self-regulating autonomous political structure. There is no need for a ruler or a monarch, since the individual retains the necessary structures and resources to get better, without external intervention.

In China, the model image of a self-regulating self-governing individual is missing, since such an idea gives express power and influence to the individual self. China has never known a trust in the self-regulating organism. Never, having had a political structure whereby its citizens discuss conflicting interests, Chinese medicine, Unschuld argues, faithfully reflected the authoritarian structures bounded by Confucian ethics, which did its best to maintain order because chaos, read political unrest, was to be prevented. The memory of constantly feuding political states was too close for the Chinese. In the case of sickness, the human organism can never be trusted to find the path to health all on its own. Because illness stems from conflict among various parties within the organism, what is required is that

of a wise physician, read also wise ruler, who understands nature's complexities. The ruler knew how to intervene in order to bring about change and more importantly before the sickness could take hold. Self-healing powers were not an issue. But then the Greeks had no idea of circulation. There are numerous examples provided throughout the book.

Moving closer to the contemporary times, the same question is asked again. What re-imaginings are occurring now in the West and China that may influence our model image of the world and in what ways will medicine change? As a way of answering this question he imagines our world one hundred years or so from now whereby one is writing about the HIV/AIDS crisis of the late twentieth century. Considering another example, what we understand as the Enlightenment Project, that science would show us the way to a bright, more rational, secularised world, has in a strong sense failed us. Science and medicine we note seem to have contributed to our illnesses, we are polluting ourselves and it seems, worse still, our very home. Our earth is sick. What kind of impact, if any, will this kind of model image have on how we re-imagine science, medicine, philosophy or social relationships in a globalizing world? What will happen to Western medicine and Chinese medicine? Will Chinese medicine survive? Unschuld offers a response while providing a solid context of meaning.

This book is a must read for all primary health care practitioners. The book asks and seeks to answer a simple question, 'What is medicine?', not from a scientific perspective but from a human one, clearly showing us that medical knowledge is a cultural construct and that knowledge is not something to be bargained for.

Reviewed by Peter Ferrigno