

# Is sickness a sin?

**I**N many primitive societies illness is seen as the punishment of the gods against those who have sinned. Such ideas were prevalent in ancient primitive cultures when the ill person was often rejected by his tribe.

In more advanced societies illness became increasingly tolerated and accepted, not as the punishment of God, but as an act of God. The patient thus came to be seen as the innocent victim of factors beyond his control. Consequently society became more caring, and increasingly began to endow upon the sick role various privileges, characteristically sympathy, relief from irksome duties, including employment, and various forms of assistance, which in recent years have included various cash payments culminating increasingly in full sick pay.

### Pathology and behaviour

However, changes are occurring in the attitudes of doctors and society towards disease processes. In the past pathology was seen as the basis of medicine, and the behaviour of the ill person was seen as a direct or indirect consequence of pathology in its broadest sense, whether histopathology or the pathology of infective agents such as bacteria or viruses.

So firm was the foundation of pathology that even the greatest psychiatrists felt compelled to use pathological models to explain many of their revolutionary theories of human behaviour, for example, Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901).

However, the growing importance of the ideas in psychiatry, coupled with the increasing prevalence of preventive services of all kinds in general practice, including immunization, child health development, contraceptive advice, antenatal care, and geriatric screening, has brought about a change in attitude towards health and sickness, which has led to such confusion that the ultimate question of "What is a patient?" has had to be faced (*Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 1974), and a new answer reached. Slowly and painfully a different model has emerged in which behaviour of sick people is seen not only as a consequence of pathology, but as one of its determinants. Perhaps there is an endless circle with behaviour influencing pathology, and pathology influencing behaviour?

It has, however, long been known that many diseases

and much clear-cut pathology are directly associated with human behaviour. Venereal disease is the traditional example, but increasingly lung cancer is coming to be seen as pathology associated with the previous behaviour of cigarette-smoking. The idea of accidents being associated with the 'accident prone' personality is another example.

Finally, in the 1970s, came the gradual realization, by people (Illich, 1974); by the profession (Elliott-Binns, 1973; *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 1973; Morrell and Wale, 1976; Baker, 1976; Jones, 1976), and by the Government (Owen, 1976), that more self-care was not only necessary but was, in fact, desirable. The idea of individuals taking responsibility for their own health and sickness began to become accepted.

If, however, individuals are really going to accept more responsibility for their own health, and we believe that they should, then it will have to be faced more openly that individuals have perhaps a far greater control over their health than has previously been realized. If this is accepted, then inevitably some deviations from health will begin to be seen, both by doctors and by society in general, as the patient's fault. Some illness, instead of being seen as a chance happening, may begin to attract the connotation of blame.

Such a radical change in attitudes would, interestingly enough, represent the beginning of a return to the views held in primitive societies. Will illness again come to be recognized as a form of punishment? Will the wheel of history turn full circle and sickness again be seen as a sin?

### References

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