

## what Webster thinks

In thinking about this book, we have come to believe that the crisis in our medical services system may stem from an incorrect premise – a wrong understanding of health. This is an immensely important error because how we define and understand health determines what the medical services system looks like and how it behaves. If we want to fix this system, first we have to understand, and agree on, what health is. Working toward this definition, the chapter will consider health by:

- ▶ probing the etymology and broad meanings of the concept of health;
- ▶ analyzing various definitions of health;
- ▶ discovering the contextual definition of health used in contemporary American society by exploring how we spend healthcare resources and what we measure to evaluate health;
- ▶ considering whether long life is an aspect of health;
- ▶ approaching a social definition of health;
- ▶ exploring the ways we use the concept of health as we think about the health of the individual, family, and nation;
- ▶ offering our own definition, from which a model for healthcare reform will later emerge.

### THE BROAD MEANINGS OF HEALTH

Along with the vagaries of the weather, commonplaces about our health hold a near corner on the market of idle conversation. “How are you?” or “How are you feeling today?” or “How have you been?” are our most routine conversational gambits. These quasi-questions are such a matter of ritual and formula that we normally intend them as mere acknowledgments or vague assertions of affinity and empathy. We expect equally automatic and meaningless reciprocity: “Just fine, thank you” or “Not bad for an old fella”;

or “Pretty good, I guess.” In fact, all but the most charitable of us tend to wince a bit when those we greet in this way choose to respond with a factual – and sometimes detailed – account their current medical condition.

Beyond the empty formalism of greeting, however, most people relish the opportunity to discuss their health and think of it often – especially when it is compromised by injury or illness. But is one’s medical condition the same thing as one’s health? Health, after all, is one of life’s core issues – a powerful and pervasive reality that affects everything we do, that shapes our perception of and interaction with the world and that often determines both the course of our lives and our understanding of the meaning of life itself.

Our assessment and description of health delineates the extent of well-being in others or ourselves. “I’m in good health,” or “She’s radiantly healthy,” or “His health has never been worse” all assert something basic and definitional about the described person. What is this condition of health, though? What are the attributes of health?

In classical Greek, the words *hugieia* [‘*υγεία*] (n.), and *hugieinos* [‘*υγείνός*] (adj.) serve as the approximate equivalent of our English words *health* and *healthy*, *hygiene* and *hygienic*. (Hugeia, also known as Hygieia, or Hygeia, usually appearing as the daughter of Asclepius on the Olympian family tree, was the Greek goddess of health, cleanliness, and sanitation. Her sister and healing partner was Panacea, the goddess of medical herbs and potions.) Use of these words (‘*υγεία*, ‘*υγείνός*) in classical literature makes clear that they apply not only to the biological condition of the body but also to a broader context of total individual well-being, including the physical, emotional and social environment in which each person lived. The Greek notion of *hygeia* implied that the body could heal itself if it were helped to do so, wrapping the body together with the environment and relationships that might help with healing.<sup>1</sup> That same expansive sense applies in Latin syntax, in which the verb *salveo* (-ere) (to be well, to be in good health) serves as the primary linguistic root of the concept of health. The present active imperative, *salve* (sing.), *salvete* (pl.), served as a common greeting, “Good health,” and by extension, “Good day!” or “Good morning!” This same meaning appeared in the Anglo-Saxon expression *wes hal*, “May you be in good health,” and migrated to English in *hail*, “Be in good health,” or, more generally and commonly meaning, “hello,” or “I salute you.” Notice here that health and greeting often have the same root, as if health always references other people, and the human relationships between people.

Other senses derived from *salveo* (-ere) are worth noting: *salve*, “salvation,” and *salvus*, *salva*, *salvum* (adj.), “well, unharmed, sound; alive; safe, saved.” The Latin health-related root (*sal-*) also served as the basis

of the Italian word for health, *salute*. This has been carried into English to denote a gesture of greeting or respect, but one that, etymologically, extends a wish for good health, just as does a letter's *salutation*.

The linguistic basis of the word *health* also lies deep in the rootstock of the English language. As noted above, its etymology stems from the Old English *hāl*, as well as from the Old Norse *heill*. In a millennium of transmutations through Old and Middle English, these root words have accreted a broad range of sense and nuance.

But here the meaning and use of these root words is related. Many words denoting health not only describe the condition of a person, but also express the wish for good health. These are relationship words, used in greeting. From their earliest etymological roots, words about health have described or referred to the relationship between people. Health and relationship have mingled in the origin of both ideas – the warp and woof of a primordial, complex and inevitable pairing.

Based on the work of philologist W. F. Bolton, English linguist David Crystal studied the many related words derived from the Germanic root of both *hāl* and *heill*. These include: *hail* (*hail from, hail fellow*), *wassail*, *whole* (*wholesome, wholesale, wholesome*), *holy* (*holiness, holiday*), *hallow* (*Halloween*), *hale*, *heal* (*healer*) and, of course, *health, healthy* and *healthful*.<sup>2</sup>

Dense, multi-tiered meanings for the notion of health operate in other languages as well. In French, for example, the word *santé* suggests temperament, constitution, well-being and hygiene. Synonyms include the notion of balance, order, equilibrium, and proportion, of calmness and security, strength and power, happiness and prosperity. Much of the same linguistic complexity applies to the German *gesundheit*.<sup>3</sup> All Western languages, in fact, appear to employ an extensive range of synonyms for their respective words for health. While the concept of individual physical well-being and proper functioning anchor the primary definitions of these words, all extend the sense of health to include dimensions of psychological, social, and material soundness, and all predicate the meaning of health on the relationship of an individual to some function, object, or other person.

The notion of health evokes a broad range of positive human conditions, in turn richly expressed in language. Vitality, vigor, well-being, alertness, fitness, energy, contentedness, strength, endurance, focus, happiness, capability, accomplishment, satisfaction – all serve as synonyms of and describe some aspect of what we call health, and all express the central idea that health is the state or condition necessary for people to be attuned to (or in relationship with) their world or community.

## SOME DEFINITIONS

Most contemporary dictionary definitions of health are fairly limited in outlook, and fail to reflect on the etymological origins of the word and concepts from which our understanding of health developed.

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* defines health as:

1. The overall condition of an organism at a given time.
2. Soundness, especially of body or mind; freedom from disease or abnormality.
3. A condition of optimal well-being: *concerned about the ecological health of the area.*
4. A wish for someone's good health, often expressed as a toast.<sup>4</sup>

The first definition is incomplete. "The overall condition of an organism at any given time" might help us understand the organism, but would not enable us to understand its health. For that understanding, we must know something about the organism's natural history and habitat. We need to be aware of the normal function of the organism and what relationships it characteristically forms with its environment and other organisms like it. Definition number one does not require us to place an organism in the context of its relationships, but only to consider its condition – its individual momentary status. For human beings, placing the individual organism in her or his environment appears to be the first necessary attribute of a robust definition of health.

The second definition, "soundness of body and of mind", does not help much either. This definition is much like the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition: "Soundness of body. That condition in which its functions are duly and efficiently discharged."<sup>5</sup> Both definitions are artfully simple, but unsatisfying, as "soundness" begs us to ask, "Soundness for what function?" and the functions of the body demand that we know what the body's functions are, and to understand the requirements for those functions to be effectively carried out. *Soundness* again requires us to know how the body and person stands in relation to his or her environment and culture, suggesting again that it is relationship that defines health, not soundness *per se*.

What about *freedom from disease*? The absence of disease is not the presence of health, and the presence of disease does not mean the absence of health. A coal miner working in the pitch dark in 19th-century Wales might have been free from a disease for a period. Hands covered with coal dust, bent over in the bowels of the earth 12 hours a day, exploited by the ruling classes from the day of his birth until the day of his untimely death

– could he be healthy? A happy, hard-working diabetic, involved with family and embarking at new projects, has a disease but may be perfectly healthy at the same time. Health, we will suggest, is about functioning in relationships. Health is about hope and economic and political freedom, as much as it is about freedom from disease.

As to *freedom from abnormality*, if we are to accept this aspect of the *American Heritage* definition of health, we must assume that health is impossible for an abnormal person. But doesn't normality imply a social context? Nearsightedness was abnormal (and unhealthy) for a hunter-gatherer, but normal (and not unhealthy) for a middle-aged doctor. Intellects either far above or far below the "normal" range are, according to the definition, "abnormal" but is either suggestive of health? Normality and health are unrelated, but this analysis suggests again that health is about function, and, even more, about function in a social and cultural context.

Definition three, a *condition of optimal well-being*, is closer, but it also misses the mark. Optimal well-being implies both subjective and objective best function. It gets at the subjective sense of health, but does not explicate the functional, and relational, connotations of health.

Definition four, *a wish for someone's good health, often expressed as a toast*, is closest to the etymologic roots of health because it includes the relationship implied in health, but is limited in scope to just a greeting.

*The New Oxford American Dictionary* definition, *the state of being free from illness or injury*, is the most limited of all.<sup>6</sup> As we discussed above, it is possible to have an illness or an injury and still be healthy. But perhaps, the notion of *a state* is useful. While it is possible to have illness or injury and still be healthy, being in the state of freedom from illness or injury implies just that, just and exactly freedom. People who are not healthy are consumed, in some way, by their illness or injuries. People who are not healthy are constrained; they cannot go about their lives as they choose. They cannot have the relationships they value, or those relationships are limited by their illness or injury. People who are not healthy are not free to go about their lives because of the loss of some body function. And people who are healthy *are* able to function *and* have relationships that are important to them.

The World Health Organization definition of health is: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." This comes closer, but still does not get at the need for functionality or relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Well-being appears to be a necessary condition for health, yet it does not provide a complete definition. Social well-being, for example, is a function, not of the individual, but of his or her community and environment, and from this observation we learn that the health of an

individual is meaningless without an understanding of the health of the family, community, and society. We learn again that health is about relationship, not just well-being.

Notice, in all these definitions, that long life, or longevity, did not appear even once. Our understanding of the meaning of health does include much about function and relationship. Our understanding of the meaning of health does *not* include anything about longevity.

## **TOWARD A NEW AND BETTER DEFINITION OF HEALTH**

With the above definitions, an individual human body is set forth as the unit by which we can grasp the meaning of health, but we quickly discover that we must add the relationship between a body and the social environment in which that body lives. In addition, although soundness of body suggests functionality, it does not denote the subjective well-being of a human in her or his own context. Relationship, soundness, and functionality are clearly aspects of health, but by themselves these aspects do not define health, but merely contribute to its definition.

Here, then, is a more robust definition of health, one that we believe meets the tests of etymology as well captures what most Americans mean by health: *Health is the biological, social, and psychological ability that affords an equal opportunity for each individual to function in the relationships appropriate to his or her cultural context at any point in the life cycle.* Health is not the mere absence of illness or disease, nor is it an entirely physical state. In fact, like an ocean wave, health has an ambiguous, momentary, and situational reality. Health is the conditional manifestation of the ability to function in relationship. Health as a condition can be limited by pain, be limited by mental disorder, or limited by physiological dysfunction – but implied in that condition, and necessary to give that condition meaning, is the existence of the superstructures of family and community. In order for health to be actualized, there must be relationships, and those relationships have necessary conditions, contexts, in which they can exist and be stable over time. The predicate of relationship is the gorilla in the room, the definitional piece present in the etymology of the word health, and missing in all the definitions, including the oft-cited WHO definition, that we have critiqued above. But not only is the predicate of relationship missing from the dictionary, it is missing from medical services, and all our healthcare spending. Without providing the context, without attending to the superstructure of relationship, without making sure family and community are functional, health becomes an absurd concept, and we can spend all the money we have and hope to have, still not achieve the health we want, and always lack good health outcomes. What other countries have

(but, like us, are losing) that we do not have is the context, the stability of family and community.

The notion of equal opportunity for function is also important to health, and brings in the relationship between individual health and population health, which we first described in Part One. Individual health, you will recall, is a subjective state, that comes out of a person's beliefs about lifestyle and medical services choices, and involves some negotiation between the need for function in relationship, the desire for discomfort control, and an interest in life span as a consumer good, as well as the existence of functional families and communities. Population health is the collective expression of the health of the individuals in a population. But it is also a reflection of the collective ability of individuals in a population to enter and sustain relationships without social impairment. It is also a reflection of the resilience and added meaning that the population as a whole brings to individuals, recalling that a population in a place, as an organism, as a whole, can be greater than the sum of its parts. Population health is measured by measuring some aspects of the health of individuals, and collating those measures, with frequency of occurrence of a specific finding, circumstance, disorder or trait being the numerator of the measure, and the number of people in the population being the dominator. We currently measure population health inaccurately, using measures which are easy to obtain but which do not adequately reflect the meaning of health; that is, we do not measure function in relationship, but measure mostly longevity or the occurrence of disease in a population.

Equal opportunity to function in relationship is important to the meaning of health because of the extent to which social interference, and not just mental or physical function, can impair or impede relationships. The social impairment of relationship is no less ill health than physiological impairment. It was no better to be physiologically well in Sarajevo during the disintegration of Yugoslavia than it is to have cancer in the United States, was no better to be a poor black kid in central Harlem in the 1990s than it is to be a 10 year old with juvenile onset diabetes in the suburbs of Des Moines, and maybe worse, from the perspective of health and life chances. Where social structure impairs relationship, where there is significant inequality, social conflict is certain to result, social conflict which undermines the integrity of family and community, the necessary conditions for health.

There is no ontological or immutable fact or state of health, but rather a set of conditions that, in their conjunction, yield a condition we call health. This condition implies a certain amount of freedom that is social and political, a certain amount of mental and physiological well-being, some freedom from the encumbrance of disease and injury, and implies the existence of

family and community for the relationships that give health meaning.

When one considers the sheer size of healthcare literature and health policy, it is striking how little attention is devoted to understanding health, and to agreeing on an adequate definition of health on which to build a healthcare system. It is as if we decided to spend 16 percent of our budget on a service that we are unable to define or describe and to order it before we have decided what benefit we expect from it. It is as if we had decided to devote a huge portion of our income ordering from a catalogue, without either having the catalogue or being able to look inside it.

### **IF HEALTH IS RELATIONSHIP, WHAT IS HEALTHCARE?**

Collectively, we spend billions of dollars on information about, and services and products to promote, the individual quest for health. The fact is, though, that the vast bulk of health-related expense is transacted within what we have come to call *healthcare*, or perhaps more fittingly, the *healthcare industry*. Healthcare implies the involvement of others to support an individual's or the public's health. For us to talk about the ways in which America pursues health or directs its investments related to health, we must consider not only individual activities but the vast enterprise of medical services. As we will soon see, the same muddiness and confusion that surround the meaning of health also bedevil our definitions of healthcare, and, hence, of its actions and priorities.

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, defines healthcare as, "The prevention, treatment, and management of illness and the preservation of mental and physical well-being through the services offered by the medical and allied health professions."<sup>8</sup> This seems a curiously shallow definition, in that it confines healthcare to the tasks of managing illness and preserving well-being. This definition assumes both that health is the absence of disease and that services offered by the medical and allied health professions are effective in preserving mental and physical well-being. Both are important and worthwhile pursuits, of course, but the definition ignores the fundamental sense of the term, namely to provide services that create or reinstate health. Indeed, the definition assumes that all healthcare is subsumed by the services of the medical professions. But if health relies on the existence of families and communities so that individuals can have relationships, and if the action of the medical professionals focus only on providing services that prevent, manage, and treat illness and preserve well-being, then a more robust definition of healthcare must reflect on the need for functioning families and communities, and must anticipate more participants than just medical professionals and their allies.

An alternative definition might look something like this: *Healthcare is the promotion and recovery of function by individuals, and the strengthening of families and communities as the context for that function, through services offered by medical and allied health professionals, and organized by private and government organizations and institutions.*