



## 'Changing Ideas – Changing Health'

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### Overview:

Central to this lecture was the premise that there is a strong connection between science and culture: how people think about the world is closely related to how they value and think about other things as well. Glouberman focused on changing perceptions of order and disorder, the environment and identity through the ages. The implications of the interaction between these three 'big ideas' and our view of health were explored.

### Key ideas:

- Three philosophical ideas:
  - Order and chaos – both are significant aspects of the world.
  - Humans' relationships with nature and the need to learn to live in harmony with the natural world.
  - The notion of self - how we know who we are.
- 'Laplace's Demon'.
- Inflammation and 'bounce-back-ability' – vital aspects of health based on capacity to deal with stress.

### Summary:

Dr Glouberman's lecture focussed on three philosophical ideas about the nature of the world, which he traced over time and from which he drew ideas about health.

#### 1. Order and Chaos

The first idea explored the underlying nature of the world. It goes from the notion that everything is chaotic, to it's being ordered by a divine being, to the notion that the world is inherently ordered and predictable, to the most recent notion that there's an interaction between order and chaos that's happening all the time.

Most cultures have the notion that there is a god or a series of forces that creates order from chaos. These 'creation myths' lead to the question of whether chaos is the fundamental nature of the world or, alternatively, is there an order that underlies even the most chaotic events? For ancient Greek philosophers, such as Heraclites, the physical world was a 'world of becoming' in which everything is in a constant process of change; others believed that change is an illusion, that reality must be unchanging. Plato expanded the question to incorporate the nature of knowledge. He believed that knowledge – and the objects of knowledge – cannot change, and as the world around us is full of change (the world of becoming), knowledge must come from some other world (the world of being).

In contrast, the Aristotelian world view insisted that we are capable of knowing the world through observation and reason and this remained the dominant belief for a period of almost two millennia. He introduced the idea that there are purposes to things. Late mediaeval and early renaissance thinkers (Copernicus, Galileo) began to question Aristotle and by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century Francis Bacon argued that there are things inherent in our nature that mislead us to look at the world in certain ways that are false. He advocated the destroying of these false idols through gathering and testing information to get at objective truths.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers like Descartes began to see the world as a physical mechanism that can be understood with a high degree of certainty. This notion was strengthened by the Newtonian view of the world. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Simon Laplace set out to complete Newton's work and introduced an idea of an all-knowing being, now referred to as 'Laplace's demon'. Glouberman suggested that we all believe something like this: that if only we had all the laws of nature right, and if only we had all the information, then we could figure everything out. Latterly, many have demonstrated that Laplace's theory cannot be defended and today we accept both order and chaos as significant aspects of the natural world. We know that there are lots of non-forecastable phenomena.

## 2. How Humans Relate to Nature

Paganistic belief placed humans as one element of nature. Everything had spirits. Everything had a soul. Later, in mediaeval society humans were placed at the top of the hierarchy of living things created by God, just below angels. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Baconian ideas (further developed by Hobbes), about taming nature for human ends suggested the possibility of control over nature, and scientific advance began to be seen as a solution to the problems that occur in nature. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a sense that it was necessary to live in harmony with nature arose and Rachel Carson's book 'Silent Spring' (1962) marked a major shift in public attitudes towards a respect for nature. Today our understanding involves both views: that humans and science can tame nature, with beneficial effects, and that although humans are special in many ways, we must learn to live in harmony with nature or face extinction.

## 3. The Notion of Self

In primitive societies individuals identified themselves in terms of their relationships with others. The Ancient Greeks looked at self in a political context with Aristotle's declaration that the goal of a person is to lead a good life, which was thought to be dependent on one's place in society and how one uses that place. In the mediaeval period the notion of the independent self emerged, personal identity becoming distinct from family, social position, and so on. Descartes, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, distinguished mind and body as distinct substances. He believed that we have direct access to our minds from which it follows that we know who we are ("I think therefore I am"). The notion of self moved from being entirely external to being almost entirely internal. Most recently there has been a reintegration of individuals and their social (and physical) environment and today the individual is emergent from multiple connections with a rich sense of individuality.

## Impact of Changing Views

Views on health from Ancient Greek times to the 17<sup>th</sup> century are summarised in the table below.

<b>Four Metaphors for Health</b>			
<b>Time period</b>	<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Health</b>	<b>Medicine</b>
From Ancient Greece for almost 2000 years	Four Humours (Aristotle, Galen)	Balance of humours	Rebalance through lifestyle, cupping, purging, bleeding
Mediaeval period	Garden of Eden <sup>1</sup>	No pain, no sickness, no aging	Unnecessary
Renaissance	Chemical Processor (Paracelsus)	Proper processing occurs	Add some chemicals, counteract others
17 <sup>th</sup> century	Machine (Descartes)	Smooth running	Adjust mechanisms through surgical or chemical intervention

<sup>1</sup> Glouberman noted that the WHO definition of health as "a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being" is typically Edenic and suggests that, in fact, no one is truly healthy.

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By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the chemical-mechanical framework of health had gained broad acceptance and led to the introduction of public health policies including the construction of modern water and sewage systems. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, germ theorists (Koch, Pasteur) identified the direct causes of diseases and increased control over their spread. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was recognised that many people were suffering from curable diseases which they could not afford to treat and ultimately the National Health Services was established in 1948 with the promise that it would result in an ever healthier population which, in turn, would reduce demand for health care. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas McKeown argued that health is more than the chemical-mechanical model. His ideas inspired the Black Report (1980) which showed there are inequalities in health along socio-economic lines. Since then determinants of health have been identified and some have argued that control over one's life brings together many of these determinants.

One hypothesis is that the incidence and severity of inflammations throughout a life span can have a strong influence on the occurrence of diseases. Inflammation is a normal occurrence when the body responds to the stress of everyday life and, when followed by a period of recovery, it increases the tolerance for the next inflammatory episode. However, in people who are less healthy, there is less chance of complete recovery before another inflammatory episode occurs and chronic inflammation is associated with increased risk of a range of diseases.

Theories about inflammation are able to consider current ideas about order and disorder, how people know who they are, and their relation to nature. Healthy lives contain periods of order and disorder and the ability to deal with natural disorder ('bounce-back-ability') becomes the mark of the healthy person. Health is related to the range of resources available to a particular individual: genetic structure, the development of identity, education, access to health care, etc. Dr Glouberman concluded that 'bounce-back-ability' might be used to help set the direction of public policy to reduce health inequalities, as interventions which increase and strengthen individuals' resources to accept and respond to disorder in their lives, can narrow the health gap between the rich and the poor.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of  
the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.