



# HEALTH: HELP, HYPE AND HOPE

by Robert Watt

Last year, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter brought in policy changes aimed at limiting fake news. One concern was the quantity of on-line health misinformation. Research found that the most viral pieces pushed wild conspiracies between governments and medical communities and promoted the ditching of common medical treatments of life-threatening diseases for unproven cures. The clamp down hasn't prevented what has been described as 'an infodemic of cures or treatments for the coronavirus', nor conspiracies of American coverups and bioweapons research facility accidents. Fake news is dangerous when lives are at stake, it can drown out official advice and deflect investigations into virus origins and best practices that could help mitigate future outbreaks.

Fake news about health is nothing new. Tales of cures and theories about the causes of illnesses have existed as long as people have gotten sick. Doing nothing when we, or loved ones, are ill isn't an option, it's better to try something. Today there is no end of things to try. Modern medicine, traditional medicines, faith healing and centuries of old wives' tales passed down from our ancestors. We have, at the touch of a few buttons, access to the medicine cabinets, traditional practices and folklore of every culture being hyped across the

internet. Surely among the combined millions of years of experience there must be some truth, something that will work.

## TREATMENTS YOU TRUST

Conventional medicines of course have a good chance of working. The drugs and medical devices are heavily regulated. They have been tested and proven in clinical trials to be effective at treating diseases. There are standards for testing and for production, rules



One apple a day keeps doctors away.

about what can be claimed, the disclosure of side effects and the mandatory reporting of adverse incidents. If you're seriously ill, that's what a reputable doctor should offer you. Therapies that have been recognised as being beneficial are similarly licensed, such as physiotherapy, and practitioners have to meet standards of education and training. Beyond these there is everything else, a spectrum of potions and notions that range between the crackpot wacky and the unproven possible. Judging where something lies on that scale is difficult. People will point out



THEY TYPICALLY COMBINE BITS OF EASTERN RELIGION AND ANCIENT PRACTICES WITH PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC THEORIES OF HOW THEY WORK THAT BUILD ON OLD MOTIFS AND POPULAR INTERESTS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT, ECOLOGY OR SPIRITUALITY.



You sneeze maybe because someone is missing you.

that there is often an element of truth to old wives' tales. A typical example is the adage 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away.' We all know that eating fresh fruit is healthy and the vitamin C from the apple is beneficial to the immune system so, as the argument goes, it was right all along.

This saying illustrates the problems with health advice - evidence isn't always important; you can believe apples are nature's wonder-food and consume large quantities, or treat it with scepticism and go with the more evidence based daily cocktail of 5 portions a day and an armful of vaccines. Basically, if you trust the saying it's the wisdom of the ages, if you don't, it's an old wives' tale.

## YOU ARE WHERE YOU EAT

A lot of health advice relates to what we eat and drink. The connection between eating healthily and being healthy is encapsulated in the title of a popular 1940s book by Victor Lindlahr 'You are what you eat.' It's not just what you eat, but where you eat it. Grow up in a British household, and feeling a bit 'under the weather' would be instantly treated with a hot cup of tea. In Scotland a hot toddy (whiskey with hot water and sugar) is prescribed for a cold. Concoctions of honey, butter and vinegar for coughs. These remedies have all recently resurfaced as corona cures. In China, drinking hot water seems to be the popular panacea and unsurprisingly that is also being touted on-line as a corona killer. In India, a famous traditional cure-all is cow urine. The medicine called Gomutra has been used for centuries in Ayurvedic medicine for all manner of therapies and also as hand sanitiser and floor cleaner. The cow is considered a sacred animal in Hinduism and a drinking cow urine ceremony was recently held in New Delhi to promote its use in tackling the coronavirus.

Certain foods are often singled out as especially influential over the body. In China you should eat ginger in the morning to give you energy and radish at night to calm down your organs. Eating raw garlic is widely believed to cure all sorts of sickness. In the West spinach makes you strong, fish gives you brains, carrots improve eyesight, cheese before bed gives you nightmares.

## AN UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

There is no doubt that diet is important, but the role of a specific item is frequently a myth whose origins are tied to product promotions. No single food or drink has any



Hot toddy





Chicken soup is a remedy for cold.

curative value, but they can, along with hot baths and laughing make you feel better. A bit of pampering when you're feeling poorly is great medicine, there is no end of things that can do that, though it helps if it has an underlying philosophy.

Balance has become ubiquitous with health and wellbeing. We are advised to have a balanced diet, a balanced lifestyle, to balance work with leisure and family. Balance is a recurring theme throughout history, the ancient Greeks believed that the balance of the various fluids (humours) within the body was important to health and temperament. This belief informed medical practice well into Victorian times and treatments were based on reducing a surplus of one fluid, such as by bloodletting, or restoring balance by eating certain foods. Ayurvedic medicine in India has a similar underlying philosophy of three humours, (known as Doshas) which make up a person's constitution and can become out of balance with our true nature. This balance is restored using herbs, therapeutic aspects of yoga and spiritual guidance from astrology. It's easy to recognise similarities between Greek and Indian theories for illness, and Chinese Traditional Medicine which similarly describes health as 'the harmonious interaction of entities and the outside world', and disease 'as a disharmony in interaction'. It's tempting to think this commonality in the theme

of balance, developed by far flung cultures, were arrived at through knowledge of a universal truth. More likely they have slowly spread along trade routes, or that similar explanations arose from similar thought patterns. Humans are, after all, not that different physically or mentally.

#### CAUSE AND EFFECT

We have a natural inclination to link causes with effects. Both the East and West share a desire to discourage particular undesirable behaviours by associating them with fearful results. In China one saying is 'don't play with fire

or you will wet the bed'. In the UK wetting the bed is caused by picking dandelions (a common wild flower). In China if you eat ear wax you will become dumb, in the UK if you pick your nose your head will cave in. Other examples describe interactions between involuntary bodily signals and prophecies. The Chinese say if you keep sneezing, someone is missing you and if your left eyelid twitches, you'll soon make a fortune. The number of times you sneeze in the UK is a happy (and rhyming) prediction of receiving a wish, a kiss, a letter or something better. If your ears feel hot it means someone is talking about you.

As a child I was concerned enough about the truth of old wives' tales to avoid receiving bad luck from walking under ladders or opening an umbrella indoors. A more rational explanation for not putting an open umbrella on the ground in China, is that a snake will hide underneath. There is nothing rational about the fear of certain numbers though. It is estimated that at least 10 percent of the U.S. population has a fear of the number 13. Some UK streets of houses miss out number 13 and similarly in China I've noticed elevators without the number 4.

#### FAITH AND HOPE

For most of us, these beliefs are not strong. However, if there is a choice,



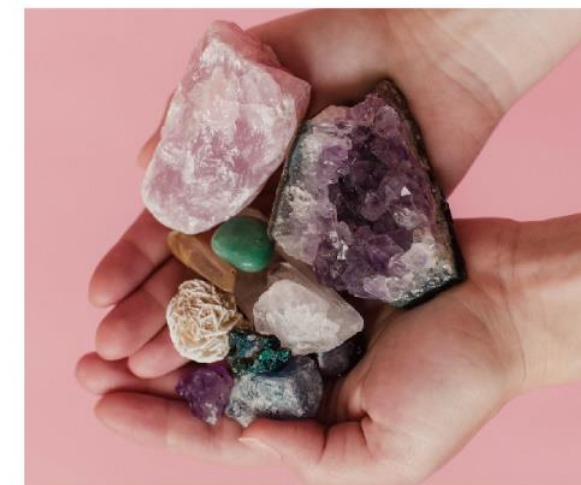
Ginger is believed to have miraculous medical function.



Disappeared 13th floor

another date available, or a path around a ladder many would take it. After all, why tempt fate? Even in these more enlightened days old traditions influence our lives and are part of our natural reactions. It makes us susceptible to the latest snake oil being peddled, especially when they are built on familiar tropes. New age, alternative, complimentary, or holistic medicine has a growing audience among the healthy middle classes. They typically combine bits of eastern religion and ancient practices with pseudoscientific theories of how they work that build on old motifs and popular interests about the environment, ecology or spirituality.

An example is healing crystals, a new phenomenon portrayed as having roots in their ancient use by shaman around the world. The narrative picks selectively from science, Hindu beliefs about chakras and Greek based astrology. Anyone who knows about geology or electronics would immediately see the bunkum in the rationales given, but that hardly matters. If you believe they have some power to heal, the mechanism of how they do it isn't important.



Healing crystals

## “老讲究” 是无稽之谈吗？

关于新冠病毒肺炎的预防 and 治疗方法，人们众说纷纭，尤其在社交媒体上，各种真真假假的信息也像传染病一样大肆流传。这真是应了那句老话：病急乱投医。

医学发展到今天的水平是经过几千年的发现和研究。在人们对一些疾病束手无策的时候，总会想到死马当活马医，中药、西药、精神疗法、民间偏方都要试一遍才甘心。还有一些流传了千百年的“老讲究”也总是会在某些时刻浮出水面。

这些“老讲究”不是哪个国家独有的，很多人认为那些都是无稽之谈。但如果我们仔细分析一下，有些说法也不无道理。



Don't you open an umbrella indoors