

## 'Holism' in health and caring.

Since 1947, and as recently as 2006, The World Health Organisation has defined health being *"a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."*

It goes on to say that the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.

These statements are well meaning, but seem destined to be impossible to achieve. However, with understanding of the 'holistic' precept of "complete physical, mental and social well-being", a sound foundation for planning is more likely to achieve these objectives.

The term 'holism', can be defined as the **theory** that the parts, or systems, of any whole cannot exist and cannot be understood except in their relation to each other and to the whole.

The general principle of holism was concisely summarized by Aristotle in the 'Metaphysics' as "The whole is more than the sum of its parts."

Holistic, as an adjective is used to indicate that the inter-connectedness of the many parts is being taken into consideration when planning and thinking about or taking action with 'the whole'.

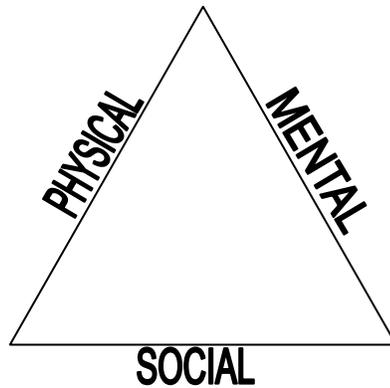
Thus 'holistic care' is care that which takes the interaction of the physical, mental and social aspects of the person into account when assessing, planning and carrying out that care.

In modern times, and throughout the world, command of the huge expansion of knowledge has become increasingly fractionalised and compartmentalised, so that it is very difficult for anyone to take a truly holistic approach to something as complex as human health, illness and care. However, the caring services are in a very good position to cooperate to make 'holistic care' a reality.

From this explanation it will be realised that 'holism' is not a synonym for 'whole', which views the parts as co-existent but not inter-connected, nor is the adjective 'holistic' a synonym for 'complete', which indicates that all the components have been considered, but as separate entities. It is not unusual for this mistake to be made and the 'bio-psycho-social model of care' which is described as being 'holistic' is frequently discussed and implemented without fully understanding and facilitating the inter-connectedness of the parts.

### **An Holistic Concept of Health and Welfare**

It has become custom to illustrate the aspects of the health concept with a triangle that sometimes denotes Body, Mind and Spirit, but more usually uses the adjectives, as in the diagram.



*Figure 1. Aspects contributing to health.*

There is a problem with this concept because 'social' is a very intangible aspect of being human and at best is only a part of the much wider dimension of the person that is an expression of body and mind.

More recently the concept of the bio-psycho-social model of health has been adopted. The component parts are defined as adjectives rather than as the nouns, and these are illustrated by way of interlocking circles where the inter-connected biological, psychological and sociological aspects contribute equally to health.



*Figure 2 The Venn diagram of the Biopsychosocial model.*

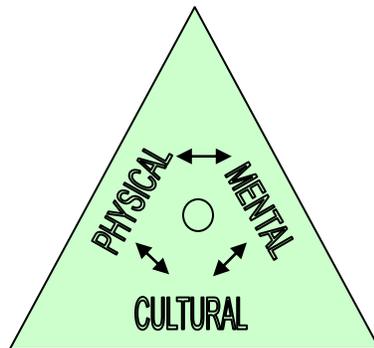
Neither of these concepts is complete in incorporating all the aspects of our being that make us uniquely human, or contribute equally to our health. What is missing are all our **cultural faculties** which are the component parts of sociability: those of language and story telling; art and creativity; music and dance; humour, play and spirituality.

There is not a generic name for cultural faculties, and the term 'culture' and 'cultural' usually refers to the people engaging in music, art and such like, and the term 'society' and 'social' refers to people interacting with each other. Neither of these conveys the importance of these factors to a full understanding of health. Being based on the neurology of the physical brain and dependent on the thinking, feeling and memorising of the mind, they are the key factor in the inter-connectedness and interdependence of all the parts that make us human, and when the term 'social' is

used in relation to health and relationships, these understandings must be borne in mind.

One of the factors of our cultural inheritance is 'spirituality' and it is very difficult to define. It is an experience that is variously described as a feeling of being at one with the universe and other people, or as feeling a sense of awe, mystery and fulfilment, which possibly arises when all the physical and social needs are being met. It is a controversial idea but Religions, which are man made organisations that define 'faith' and preach 'morality' can lose touch with universal spiritual dimension of being human.

The figure below gives an illustration of an holistic understanding of the 'health' of individuals



*Figure 3 Aspects constituting an holistic view of health*

(The circle at the centre of the diagram could stand for health but could also stand for the uniquely human experience of conscious awareness of contentment, which can accommodate some disease and disability.)

Whilst bearing in mind the inter-connectedness of all parts of the person, the physical, mental and cultural aspects of health will be considered in more detail separately.

Health of the body is shown with physical fitness, and it is maintained with a diet that contains the correct balance of protein, fats and carbohydrate, and the necessary minerals and vitamins. In addition to this, adequate fluids are needed and activity and exercise must be balanced with rest and sleep.

Ill health can be due to many factors such as injury, infections, neoplasms and degeneration. These can result in the loss of function and pain of the many conditions which lead to the necessity for medical and health care.

Health of the mind is shown with emotional and psychological well-being.

Thinking and feeling are functions of the physical brain and therefore dependent on a healthy 'body', so a distinction is made between disorders of the brain and disorders of behaviour. It is, however, very difficult to define the distinction between healthy, or sound behaviour and unhealthy, or unsound behaviour'.

A dictionary definition of mental health is "A state of emotional and psychological well-being in which an individual is able to use his or her thinking and emotional capabilities, function in society, and meet the ordinary demands of everyday life." This is shown by having a sense of purpose, by having a network of friends and relations and social activities, and by experiencing contentment.

Cultural/Social health is difficult to distinguish from mental health but is shown by involvement in a variety of activities with others, at work and at play. All the cultural abilities are there for sharing and enhancing life, and for providing the pleasures and rewards of companionship.