

Regional

Anthropologist sees how cultures use medicine

Medicine may appear very sophisticated and high-tech to us today, but its origin can be traced to among the first human groups who tried to find cures for all kinds of diseases through natural sources. Today, many ethnic groups continue that practice, and they have attracted the attention of the modern medical establishment.

Some medical researchers work to understand and incorporate this knowledge — passed between generations — into 21st Century medicine.

One person who has been studying these cultural experiences is Aminata Cairo. She was born and raised in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her parents are from Suriname, in South America. She received her bachelor's degree in physical education from Berea College in Kentucky, her master's in science in clinical psychology from Eastern Kentucky University, a second master's in arts and a doctorate in medical anthropology from the University of Kentucky. Today she is an assistant professor in the department of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Cairo's cultural background gives her the perfect position to understand how different cultures look at medicine and how that impacts their well-being.

"Like most people, I had not heard of anthropology until I received my master's degree in clinical psychology," Cairo said. "Then I realized that I needed to understand how different cultures look at medicine and that is how I got interested in anthropology, the whole idea about cultures."

Cairo's interest and involvement in medi-

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

cal anthropology took a somewhat circuitous route.

"How people move through their environments was a combination of things that always attracted me," she said. "I found that the way I was trained (as a psychologist) was not enough, so I felt I needed to deal with cultural issues and that is why I got into medical anthropology."

Because of her training in psychology, she has specialized in mental health issues.

When asked about how Western medicine compares with more traditional ones, she said that she finds differences and similarities.

"In the Western world you also use home remedies many times," Cairo said. "In Suriname they believe in home remedies and even doctors believe in them, although they will not dispense them."

In a country with such a diversity of cultures, Suriname has much to offer in terms of traditional medicine.

"The Maroons of Suriname (former African slaves who escaped into the jungle) have their own remedies, which are adaptations of what they used in Africa. If you need a therapeutic massage you go to the Javanese. If you need herbs you go to the Chinese. Each ethnic group has its medical identity," Cairo explained.

But how can we distinguish what is good traditional medicine from what is not?

"That's a good question. The answer is in their cultural significance, even if they serve only as a placebo," Cairo said.

Cairo said that she has found that religious beliefs also play a major role in medical ideas.

"Definitely religious beliefs help them to feel better," she said. "The relation with nature is also important because it gives them the impression that you live in balance. Even when it comes to cancer and HIV they go for natural medicines. They take natural remedies before they go to the doctor."

Another issue studied by medical anthropologists is the relationship between the doctor and patient, something that has long been ignored in Western medical training.

"Modern medicine is a problem because it views health care as a business," Cairo said. "The cost issue is always involved. Having been a therapist myself, I am aware that HMO rules take things away from the actual care. It becomes more about taking a medicine instead of going to the root of the problem. We just don't take the time."

"Corporatization is hurting us in medicine. There are issues with the sponsoring of studies aimed at providing 'reasons' why you should take this or that. The health care system here (in the United States) is a bit scary."

"From a Surinamese perspective, when you look at an individual that person is connected to other people and nature. In order to live well, you have to live in harmony with the people with whom you are connected. You need to listen to yourself and get answers from nature. Here we mostly treat



Shan Lu/SIUE

Dr. Aminata Cairo shares some photos with students at SIUE.

the symptoms but not causes," she said.

To provide her students with a real immersion into these cultural differences, Cairo has been taking them to Suriname.

"We train students to apply their anthropological skills in the field, working with HIV-AIDS organizations and cultural organizations; how cultural beliefs influence the effectiveness. Some may believe that HIV-AIDS is a curse, not a real disease," Cairo said.

In educating to prevent the spread of HIV-AIDS she has found that generic educational

material does not work.

"It is not specific enough," Cairo explained. "For some that condition is what God wants. In some cultures, family support is critical while in others it is not."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.