When William Mariner fell ill in Tonga in the early 19th century, a Tongan and a Hawaiian disputed over the best method of curing him. The Tongan recommended bleeding; the Hawaiian, a preparation of herbs. The Tongan argued that the Hawaiian's drink was fatal if taken in large quantities. The Hawaiian himself drank the amount he had recommended. Mariner followed his example and was cured. This incident shows that Polynesian medical practices vary and have many stages of development.

Early European reports on health of Polynesians were mainly favourable. Diseases were found, from minor ailments, such as colds, lice and rheumatism, to serious ones, such as yaws, eye diseases, dropsy, elephantiasis, tetanus, and malaria. Serious epidemics were rare. Skin disorders seem to have been frequent. Food poisoning occurred. The active lives of Polynesians occasioned accidents, broken bones, dislocations, cuts and scrapes on coral, and such like. Warfare resulted in a variety of wounds. Birth defects, such as humpback, mental illnesses and retardation were found. Some peculiarly Polynesian maladies were reported, such as scaly skin from drinking kava in quantity. The problems of ageing were recognised and handled with varying degrees of sympathy in different localities.

Polynesians were very conscious of and attentive to medical problems. This can be seen clearly in their emphasis on personal and community hygiene. Baths and washings were frequent and considered a source of pleasure. Sick or menstruating persons were usually segregated. Care was taken to guard the general environment, as well as homes and villages, from pollution. For instance, different sections of a stream or beach were set apart for different purposes. Special sanitary precautions were taken when unusually large groups of people gathered.

Medical Knowledge

This was widespread and individuals achieved a high degree of self-sufficiency. Acquaintance with herbs and their properties was, and still is, general and often sophisticated. Massage, sweating, and other forms of physical therapy were used commonly. A missionary to Tahiti, reported that, when a young man injured his back carrying stones, his companions laid him face down on the grass. One pulled his shoulders, another his legs, while a third knelt on the injured back until the dislocation was corrected. Medicine was clearly not the exclusive preserve of a few experts. The kava plant was used for medicine, intoxication and ceremony. A modern Hawaiian medical practitioner emphasises that for him medicine forms a continuum with everyday life: medication is not essentially different from food.

There were medical specialists, just as there were architects and priests, although most people could build a shelter or recite a prayer. Both men and women could be medical specialists, although some societies preferred the one over the other. Methods of choosing candidates for the profession, courses of training, and degrees of specialisation varied widely. Personal qualities, such as sympathy, religiosity, or family connection, could be considered as well as professional aptitude. Religious experiences, weather signs, or other occurrences, could also play a role in selection. Training was given by established experts and included subjects such as aspects of history and religion which were considered to be connected to medicine. The important or central teachings were most often guarded secrets.
Experts in most cases restricted themselves to clearly delineated fields and refused to treat other disorders. If the remedies of one expert failed, the patient could be referred to another. Experts with impressive success rates became famous and were sought out even over great distances.

Medical Practice

Modern writers judge many Polynesian medical practices favourably, especially when compared to the Western medicine of the time. Medical experts had an extensive knowledge of human anatomy and understood the functions of many organs. Symptoms and diseases were described, differentiated, and categorized. Associations of symptoms were recognized. There is evidence of the use of experimentation, experimental animals, autopsies, and tests for diagnosis and prognosis. Errors and failures were acknowledged, as were areas of incompetence.5,6

Particular Polynesian medical achievements are impressive. The herbs used internally and/or externally were often effective, and some have value even for modern medicine.7 Minerals and animal substances were used in some areas. Special diets and purges were effective remedies for many bowel disorders.4

Physiotherapy was intensely cultivated: baths, heat treatments, sun-bathing, sweating, and special exercises, massage and palpation were used in diagnosis and treatment. The abdomen of the pregnant women were often checked for the position of the baby. Any malposition was rectified by manipulation.4 Examples of successful major surgery, such as amputations, trophining, caesarean sections, and the draining of fluid from the chest cavity have been reported. Polynesians were well in advance of their visitors in the cleaning and curing of serious wounds.1,9

Splints and herbs were applied on broken bones and are reportedly more comfortable than plaster casts. A contemporary Hawaiian poet, as a child, received Western medical treatment for a badly broken arm. After five months in a large cast,

my arm in what seemed to be touching and feeling the wrestler's hold, he broke the fracture again and reset the bones. Next, a herbaceous poultice was applied to the area and bandaged; then my arm was put in a sling. Throughout this whole procedure I felt very little pain. I visited the Kahuna once a week for six weeks to have the poultice changed. On the sixth visit he told me that my bones had healed correctly, and his treatment was over. Today my forearm looks as natural as before the fracture; this was made possible without the aid of X-rays and other modern medical techniques.4

Such traditional practitioners often use valid techniques but were unable to give a theoretical explanation of their successes.

Certain Polynesian practitioners seem to have had a good practical knowledge of the nervous system. Apparently dead patients were sometimes revived by massage, striking the soles of the feet, or lifting the nail of the big toe. Stories of so-called "out-of-body experiences" may also be based on such cases.1,5 Mental illness was viewed and treated differently in different areas. In Tahiti, the insane were respected as divinely inspired. In Samoa, the mentally ill often live as normally as possible within the villages, as do the retarded. In Hawaii, efforts were made to calm and treat the insane.

In some locations, population control was achieved by abortion through infusions or the introduction of a grass stalk, pointed stick, or bamboo implement into the womb.4 Infanticide was sometimes practiced to eliminate children who were undesirable because of physical malformation or for social reasons. Practice varied widely on this point. Conception was promoted in some areas by physical and/or ceremonial means.

Traditional Medicine Today

Even some of the non-physical therapeutic practices of the Polynesians are now appreciated as psychological aids and supports for the patient. The use of spiritual preparation, ceremony, incantation, gesture and costume could put the patient in a proper
and positive frame of mind, especially important when mental repose and physical relaxation are helpful or required, as in childbirth. To many Westerners, Polynesians seemed peculiarly susceptible to psychosomatic disorders. In some areas, they were able simply to lie down and die at will. The use of hypnotism, suggestion, and so on, may well have been highly developed in some areas. Robert Louis Stevenson caught a cold in the Gilbert Islands and consulted two medical practitioners. The first one failed, but the second, by a ceremony "I do not understand", which consisted of tapping him lightly from behind with a palm branch, made him fall into a deep sleep. "When I awoke my cold was gone".10

There is some debate about Polynesian general views of medical problems and their cures. Some societies attributed all such problems and cures to spiritual causes. Some may argue that this subject represent a spectrum with purely natural maladies and cures at one extreme, purely spiritual ones at the other, and varying combinations inbetween. Generally, medical practice was not isolated from general philosophical and religious concerns. Therefore physical disorder was thought to be somehow connected to mental or spiritual disorder to the extent that a term such as psycho-physical may be useful.4 Efforts were often made at the beginning of treatment to discover and resolve some possible non-physical cause of the ailment, such as mental or emotional difficulties of the patient, family problems, or sorcery. A purge was sometimes used to initiate treatment and had symbolic, spiritual significance as well as physical purpose.

The integration of medical thinking into the wider context of world views is evident in the agenda for a Maori medical training session: ancient mythology, incantations, history of creation, medicine and magic.9 This integration explains many practices which differ from modern Western medicine. For instance, certain treatments were related to numerology, especially the number five.4,6,8 Right and left were considered to have peculiar virtues.4 Various substances were thought to have male or female characteristics, a reflection of a dualism fundamental to much Polynesian thinking.

Polynesians used their close observations to classify and associate different objects by physical characteristics, such as form, colour and smell. Certain speculations of this sort influenced practices and prescriptions: for instance, red substances may have been thought particularly efficacious for problems involving blood.1,4,7 In Polynesian thought, names are not considered arbitrary, but revelatory of the nature of a person or thing. Objects with similar names are therefore considered to be somehow related (the names are, in fact, often based on observed characteristics of the objects). This view of names influenced both medical and religious practices.4,7 For example, in Hawaii, a ceremony terminates a successful period of medication: a special food, called pani, or closure, is eaten. The food chosen is considered to be related to the particular medicine used in treatment. The relationship between the two is revealed by the similarity of their names. A list of such related plants is contained in the Kumulipo, the ancient Hawaiian chant of the origin of the universe.11 The ceremony of pani was perhaps designed to restore the patient's cosmic equilibrium.

Specifically religious theories were formulated for medical practices.4 Legends traced to gods the origins of medical knowledge, diseases, cures, and components of prescriptions. A well-documented example is that of Nifoloa, or Long-Tooth, in Samoa, whose bite is considered responsible for diseases, including calcium deposit, in joints. Nifoloa's presence is recognised, not only by the symptoms of the patient, but by other signs, such as the appearance of animals connected with the god. Treatment involves physical therapy, the application of herbs, and ceremonies, in which traditional circumlocutions are used to deceive Nifoloa.9,9,12

Towards A Future

Since Polynesian medical practices were so intimately linked to culture and religion, Western medicine appeared as yet another disruptive force. This was especially where Western medicine was practiced or promoted by Christian missionaries, whose views of their task included the spreading of Western civilisation and the eradication of anything even remotely connected to native religion.

Despite great efforts, Western medicine has not been able entirely to replace Polynesian medical practices. One reason for this is
that Western medicine was sparsely represented and is still unavailable in many areas. Also, for most of the 19th century, Western medicine was in many respects inferior to Polynesian. Many Polynesian medical practices were successful and so retained their appeal even after the development of modern Western medicine. Moreover, some Polynesians feel that Western medicine has not identified or understood certain ills to which they are subject, and so provides no alternative to native remedies. Such case have been documented. Western doctors are insensitive to the psychological needs of Polynesian patients, an area in which Polynesian medicine is peculiarly competent. Polynesian medicine is a point of contention for nativist movements. For instance, King Kamehameha V of Hawaii promoted native medicine and the foundation in 1868 of a Hawaiian Board of Health licensed native practitioners.

At present, the relation of Polynesian medicine to Western roughly parallels that of the two cultures to each other: the two co-exist, and individual Polynesians determine their positions vis a vis each. Some opt for one to the exclusion of the other, for example, a Samoan Christian medical practitioner abandoned a treatment because it entailed the recognition of spirits. Most Polynesians comfortably use both, consulting a Western doctor when Polynesian medicine fails, and vice versa. The future probably lies in a combination of Western and Polynesian practices as in this Samoan incantation:

"Folo, oh Folo, have pity,
Pai is choking on the bone of a m.u fish
Jesus the Physician, Jesus will cure him,
Have pity."5,5

References


