

## Chapter 7 Pain and culture

### CASE STUDIES

#### Case study: The language of pain in North Indian culture

Pugh<sup>11</sup> in 1991 described the many meanings of pain in North Indian culture, and the metaphors used to express it. In the absence of Western mind-body dualism, neither traditional practitioners (*hakims*) nor their patients see pain (*dard*) solely in physical terms. When talking about pain, they draw on a shared reservoir of words, images and metaphors derived from local culture and everyday life. The metaphors they use (such as a 'burning', 'gripping', or 'stabbing' pain) blend together physical and emotional experiences into a single image. Thus, the same word, phrase or metaphor often conveys the meaning of physical and psychological suffering at the same time. For example, the metaphors used for physical pain can also be used to describe certain emotional states; sadness and grief, like 'hot' foods, can make the heart 'burn', and Urdu poets describe 'the burning ache of the heart', and the 'wonderful feelings of love-pain'. Such metaphors for pain as 'hot' or 'burning' reflect, as Pugh puts it, 'the integrated mind-body system of Indian culture'. Thus 'physical pain in Indian culture incorporates psychological malaise, while emotional distress manifests itself simultaneously in both mind and body'.

Furthermore, many of the words used to describe different types of pain suggest both its cause and its probable cure. On the

basis of 'like causes like', the description of 'hot' or 'burning' pains implies their causation by 'hot' or 'burning' foods, or by hot weather, or by certain 'hot' emotional states (such as anxiety or anger). Their treatment is by remedies that cause 'cooling', such as cool packs, or cold musk medicine that 'provides psychophysical relief for pain, palpitations, and anxiety by "cooling" the body's heat and "calming" the heart'.

Finally, the metaphors 'which imbue pain with its sensory qualities draw on the familiar surroundings of house, field, and workshop', and the experiences of daily life. A 'burning pain' of the stomach, chest or throat is often said to be accompanied by a 'sour' (*khatta*) or 'bitter' (*katu*) taste. Both these tastes are also found in most people's diet: sourness in limes, pomegranates and tamarind; bitterness in mustard-seed oil, certain lemons and turmeric. Thus, the experience of pain and the meanings given to that experience are linked to many other aspects of local culture, cuisine, language and tradition. Because different types of pain, at different times, in different places, and in different parts of the body, all carry with them so many associations – physical, emotional, social, spiritual, dietary and climatic – the Western model of pain as mainly a physical event may be inappropriate. Pugh concluded that this is because north Indian cultural patterning depicts pain 'not as a single, fixed entity but rather as a fluid, context-sensitive constellation of meanings'.