

In Memoriam Cecil G. Helman (1944-2009)

Dr Cecil Helman, medical anthropologist and author of 'Culture, Health & Illness', died on Monday 16 June at the age of 65. A few months ago he was diagnosed with motor neurone disease, which led to increasing speech debility and swallowing problems. For the last few months he was unable to speak and wrote on a pad. He had just retired as professor of Medical Anthropology at Brunel University, West London and senior lecturer at University College London, Medical School.

Cecil Helman was born in Cape Town, South Africa into a medical family, and qualified as a doctor at the University of Cape Town. He left South Africa because of the apartheid system, and then studied social anthropology at University College London. Over the years he had combined several different careers into a creative synthesis: family doctor, anthropologist, university lecturer, writer and poet.

After a brief spell as a ship's doctor in the Mediterranean, he worked as a family doctor for 27 years for the National Health Service, in an around London, combining his clinical practice with an academic career. He was an international expert on medical anthropology – the cross-cultural study of health, illness, and medical care – and on different forms of health care and healing. He did research on primary health care systems, and on traditional healers, in South Africa, Brazil, and elsewhere.

He lectured to medical students, doctors, and nurses and taught courses on cross-cultural health care. He was particularly interested in the humanistic side of medicine - especially the role of stories and narratives in medical care, and what they reveal about the inner worlds of both doctor and patient. Among his other interests were the role of metaphors and symbols in our understanding of the human body, in both illness and health; and what the Western industrialized world could learn from the healing systems of more traditional societies, when dealing with different aspects of human suffering.

His textbook 'Culture, Health and Illness' (first published in 1984; now in its 5th edition) has been translated into seven languages and is being used in more than 40 countries, including in over 120 universities, medical schools and nursing colleges. Cecil Helman is well-known to students of medical anthropology in the Netherlands as his book has been used for more than twenty years in courses at the University of Amsterdam. Primarily written for health professionals, it is without doubt the most complete overview of medical anthropology. For anthropologists it contains perhaps insufficient theoretical discussion from a general cultural anthropological perspective, but as a textbook it offers a wealth of information, a precious overview and abundant suggestions for further reading.

On the literary side, Cecil Helman published both non-fiction and fiction, including a memoir 'Suburban Shaman: Tales from Medicine's Frontline', a book of essays about the body, an anthology of stories about doctors and patients, a novella, and several books of prose poems. His poetry and other writings have appeared in many anthologies and literary journals

We have lost a creative and inspiring colleague but his solid academic and sparkling literary work will be with us for many more years.

Sjaak van der Geest

(Part of this text has been adjusted from Cecil Helman's personal website)