

How far should people be blamed for their own ill health?

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When Sir Edward Jenner discovered the smallpox vaccine in 1798, he started the ball rolling for the relatively disease-free world in the present. With cures and treatments for many ailments having been developed, it may be puzzling to some that public health still persists as an endemic societal issue. This could be explained by the rise of “affluent diseases” plaguing developed nations, or the problem of inaccessibility to modern treatment which some communities face. However, is the ill health of an individual, especially in these cases, determined by oneself or other factors? Some may argue that one’s physical and mental state of health is a manifestation of the choices one makes, or the DNA encoded in each person’s cells. Nonetheless, in a fast-paced world where poverty, consumerism and stress is rife, and where seeking help for mental illnesses is taboo, it makes the path to a healthy life much harder to take. Moreover, inequality in access to medicine and treatment is out of the hands of the individual. Hence, I believe that a person is not to be solely blamed for their own ill health.

In the realm of physical health, fitness gurus and personal trainers may argue that the choices leading to a healthy life are accessible to everyone, and that the failure of the individual to make these positive decisions is the cause of poor health. Indeed, with advanced archives and new discoveries of the nutritional levels of food, healthy diet options available at almost every juncture and sophisticated equipment for physical training, it is possible for one to choose a healthier diet and exercise. For instance, almost every eatery, even notoriously unhealthy ones like McDonald’s, have added healthier alternatives to their menus, such as trading fries for sweet corn, or ordering a salad instead of a McChicken. The same goes for exercise. Gyms and fitness corners can be found at almost every neighbourhood in urban cities, and even in rural areas, open spaces serve as a platform for equipment-free aerobic exercises like jogging. With an abundance of options to carve out a healthier figure from our old selves, consciously choosing the lazy or unhealthy way out is one’s own doing. However, what these contenders fail to realise is that while options are available, advertisements and convenience often cause one to succumb to temptation. One may step into a restaurant wanting to make the healthier choice, but be swayed by the tantalising, greasy, artery-clogging options marketed more heavily instead. A Yale University study found that the more fast-food advertisements children watched, the more fast food they consumed. Such publicity by companies cannot be controlled by the individual, making it very difficult to choose the “healthy” option. Moreover, even in many societies where such facilities and information about good health is present, there is still a prevalence of obesity-related diseases like diabetes, hypertension and cardiac-arrest due to a lack of time to fully utilise them. Urbanites may find it tough to fork out a few hours a day to pound the treadmill or prepare home-cooked meals amidst their busy 9 to 5 desk jobs. This renders the infrastructure to build a healthier society ineffective and redundant as there is insufficient time to use them, leading to increased diagnosis of chronic illnesses worldwide. At the other end of the spectrum, less developed countries face a different issue. An inequality in wealth distribution, along with corruption in these countries, as seen by how Nigeria has one of the highest scores in the Corruption Perception Index, has plagued nations; not with “affluent diseases” like obesity, but infectious diseases like Ebola or cholera and health issues like malnourishment instead. Where 10% of the world’s population earns less than US\$2 a day due to the poverty trap, these victims of income inequality are subject to poor nutrition, dehydration, and prevalence of disease as they cannot afford sufficient food, vaccines or medical treatment. This is not a

matter of the laziness not to gun for higher-paying jobs on their part, but rather a sad consequence of the capitalist economy driving the world forward, where exploitation of the poor is all too common. Clearly, not all physical maladies are developed due to poor personal choices, but rather, it is a lack of time, resources and the push towards the unhealthy track by corporations that is the downfall for many.

In terms of mental well-being, some may postulate that such conditions are purely self-inflicted. Across the globe, efforts have been made to raise awareness on conditions like clinical depression, anxiety and eating disorders, where the signs, symptoms and treatment options of these issues are made known to all. Hence, if one is to succumb to these illnesses, such as through suicide, it is deemed as a lack of initiative on their part to seek help. To illustrate, when Amanda Todd, an American teenager, posted a pre-suicide video documenting the stress and self-hate she felt after being bullied and harrassed for a topless photo of her that was circulating online, some commenters on her video criticised her for taking the easy way out and not seeking professional help. However, when there is a social stigma around the entire idea of mental health, it becomes an uphill task to regain control of one's life. This is especially proven in Asian countries, which are more conservative and hence have greater stigma surrounding such conditions. For example, 12.3% of all deaths in Hong Kong in 2015 were suicides. The reason for a person's poor mental state is, therefore, often the result of the societal atmosphere rather than themselves. Likewise, the stress levels and physical landscape one resides in can shape one's mental health. In competitive cities, students under the pressure resulting from a culture of academic rigour and excellence, as well as under the scrutiny of their helicopter parents, may feel suffocated and pushed to their breaking point. In Singapore, 17% of school-going children and teens have contemplated suicide, likely due to the pressure-cooker society they live in. These impressionable young minds are hardly to blame for the immense weight on their shoulders that has driven them to the edge of sanity. In addition, the physical landscape of certain cities has been shown to cause the development of many mental disorders. According to Dr Glyn Lewis from the Institute of Psychiatry in London, schizophrenia is twice as common in men from cities as compared to men from rural areas. Similarly, there is a 39% increased risk of mood disorders like depression or bipolar disorder and a 21% higher chance of anxiety disorders amongst city-dwellers. The physical construct of the urban landscape, though excellent for a bustling economy, is ill-suited to the minds of people. Studies have found that the amygdala and cingulate cortex in the brain tend to be overactive in many urbanites, due to daily stressors we encounter, some of which can be as simple as the invasion of personal space. When cities and stressful societies are causing a heightened risk of mental disorders, it is narrow-minded to blame one's mental ill-health on the individual alone.

At this point, naysayers may argue that often times it is the individual's DNA that is the root cause of all disease. One may attempt to steer clear of unhealthy indulgences, but if it is written in one's hereditary material, there is no escape from the shackles of their conditions. For example, BRCA1 is a major gene accounting for inherited breast cancer, and susceptibility to type 2 diabetes is influenced by various genomic factors. In the case of such diseases that have been passed on from one generation to the next, the problem quite literally lies in oneself. Marital choices can also play a role in disease development, as seen by how inbreeding amongst royal European families led to the persistence of the gene for haemophilia in their DNA. All these genetic-based diseases can therefore be attributed solely to the fault of the individual. However, with the advancement in modern gene therapy, many of these diseases can actually be prevented. As an example, mitochondrial transfer procedures allow "three-way babies" to be free from mitochondrial diseases that would otherwise affect 1 in 200 babies and result in 1 in 6500 babies

facing life-threatening illnesses. With scientific advancements giving humans the power to modify the very programming that encodes us, genetic illnesses can be eradicated. Unfortunately, such advances are often very expensive and available only to the rich and powerful. However, as research and development professionals continue to explore this lucrative, exciting field of potential medical treatment, the cost of such advances could fall dramatically over time, making diseases attributed to one's DNA an issue of the past. One could draw parallels to other technological inventions to support this case. The computers of the past were initially massive and expensive, such that they could only be accessed at universities like MIT. However, today, computers can now be found in the palm of one's hand in the form of the smartphone, and a Macbook in 2013 cost only 3 to 4 percent of one's monthly income. The potential for lowering the cost, and thereby raising the prevalence and accessibility of such gene therapy technology is high, validating the argument that individuals will no longer be to blame for inherited diseases in the near future.

There is a common saying that "health is wealth", but few realise that wealth is often a precursor to good health. Poorer nations today still face ill health due to global income inequality, where they cannot afford proper treatment or nutrition, resulting in disease associated with infection and malnourishment. On the other hand, people living in affluent cities are largely compelled to pursue unhealthy lives by coercive advertisements that implicitly encourage poor life choices. Additionally, time constraints, stress, and a stifling environment, also pose threats to one's mental and physical state of health. All of these societal and economic causes of ill health surpass the role of the individual in controlling their well-being. Perhaps the solution to the issue of people having ill health lies in the greater transfer of wealth and a shared way of life between developing and developed nations. With a more equal spread of wealth across the globe, and more relaxed, easy-going lives for city-dwellers, the biggest causes of ill health can be resolved.

Comments:

This is a thoughtful response that shows a good awareness of the issue and is comprehensively discussed in a balanced and well-substantiated way. Language is also very strong, with felicitous expressions and a clear personal voice.