



# Medicine and Culture

By Lynn Payer

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This book argues that notions of health and disease are often determined more by culture than by science. Thus Americans, favouring action over reflection, are more likely to perform mastectomies and by-pass operations than the British. The Germans, harbouring a lingering romanticism, are preoccupied with their hearts, the French are guided by their Cartesian traditions and the British adopt an empirical approach, taking treatment only when its efficacy is clearly proven. The author pinpoints many other differences in clinical and psychiatric medicine and encourages individual responsibility for health.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

In a highly illuminating comparative study of medicine in the U.S., England, West Germany and France, medical journalist Payer (*How to Avoid a Hysterectomy*) speculates that to a large extent medical care is determined by value judgments rooted in national character and priorities rather than on scientific criteria. The four countries have equivalent life expectancies, she notes, despite widely differing approaches to medical treatment. She charges that American physicians favor technology and aggressive intervention over reflection, and she links German concern for the heart to a lingering romanticism. Despite the economy-conscious English system, extensive geriatric programs cater to the revered aged, while, she claims, French medicine, especially psychiatry, reflects the country's Cartesian habit of thought as opposed to empiricism. Types and rates of gynecological and cosmetic surgery, radiology and anesthesiology vary greatly among the countries, as do their use of contraceptives and drugs especially antibiotics and alternate or holistic medicine. The author therefore urges patients to consider medical biases and range of treatment options.

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From Library Journal

In this work, a medical journalist examines the value systems underlying the practice of medicine in four countries. Writing on so broad a subject, she uses generalities to express her ideas. The chapter on medical care in France serves to exemplify: "Americans value doers, the French value thinkers." In her chapter on West Germany, we read that "physicians in all countries tend to be authoritarian, but they may be even more so in West Germany." On U.S. medicine, Payer writes that its "aggressiveness reflects an aggressiveness of the American character." Such sweeping statements, open to question, are entertaining to the lay reader interested in the philosophical underpinnings of medicine and in cultural comparisons. Large public libraries may consider purchasing. Frances Groen, McGill Univ. Medical Lib., Montreal

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Review

We have been so conditioned to believe that medical science is objective and unbiased that we rarely question decisions made by our doctors. Lynn Payer shows that medical decisions may not be as clear-cut as we think. Using case examples from France, Germany, England and the U.S., she shows that the same condition may result in different diagnoses, and that even the same diagnosis may be treated in very different ways. These differences are not due to ill-trained doctors or backward practices, but rather to differing cultural approaches to health and illness. Realizing that cultural bias does influence medical judgment makes it easier to question your doctor's decisions without questioning his motives. It also makes you realize that there are viable medical options available which are common practice in other countries and are not considered part of the lunatic fringe. -- *From The WomanSource Catalog & Review: Tools for Connecting the Community for Women; review by FGP*

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