

The WHO Definition of 'Health'

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Summary

The article "The WHO Definition of Health" was written by Daniel Callahan in 1973 and is published by the Hastings Center. The article explores the definition of health as given by the World Health Organization (WHO) and sheds light on the various objections made against the definition over time. The WHO defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (Callahan, 1973, p. 77). Callahan presents the main objections raised against the definition of health while exploring its historical origin and context. The author considers the vagueness of the term health and relates it to other concepts such as happiness, justice, and peace – all of which fall under the category of words, to which everyone has a personal meaning attributed however, a definition of which cannot be outlined. The first objection pertains to the link that the definition draws between health and peace and how the evidence is to the contrary since none of the wars could have been prevented even if the individuals had been in better health. Moreover, the evidence proves that wars are waged by developed countries that have effectively dealt with disease and have better health standards and life expectancy. Secondly, the definition is too broad and resists the dualistic version of the self.

It connects the "good of the body and the good of the self" however, this is not always the case, and individuals may rate themselves better on subjective well-being regardless of the state of their physical well-being (p. 77). The inclusion of social well-being as part of the definition of health not only turns happiness into a medical problem but also implies that an absence of disease can lead to social well-being, which in reality is untrue. Callahan asserts that linking societal evils such as injustice, tyranny, and economic troubles to poor mental health is an absurd notion and a short-sighted approach that blurs the line between responsibility and authority. It gives free rein to people to do as they please and even if it falls short of the laws of morality, it can be explained in terms of health and illness. With such a meaning attached to the definition of health, it seems that one must be healthy at all times or risk the well-being of humanity. Although the WHO definition addresses health in a wide context, its criticism stems from certain assumptions which emphasize that health is not a source of holistic well-being or happiness but rather just a part of it; medical interventions have limitations and cannot resolve social evils and political problems. Accountability of actions is highly important; not all deviant behaviour can be attributed to the sickness of the mind, moreover, neither an absence of illness means righteousness nor can medicine instil morality. Lastly, it is imperative that the boundary of each profession is realized and expectations are appropriately attributed.

Counterargument

Callahan has presented some well-formed arguments to object to the WHO definition of health however, the definition correctly identifies that the concept of health is much more than a mere absence of disease and even if it cannot be defined in positive terms, individuals can subjectively evaluate their health and can recognize when they are unwell due to presence of an illness. It also identifies the link between the goodness of the body and the self and counters the argument presented by Callahan. The idea of this unity of body and self stems from an example that in the complete absence of health i.e. death, there is no conception of the self therefore diminished health can result in a diminished self. The definition rightly takes into account the subjective experiences of individuals as each person places a different level of importance on different conditions; what might be significant for one may hold no importance for the other. Similarly, individuals attribute a varied meaning to loss, therefore; the definition of well-being for one individual cannot be applied to another. The WHO also acknowledges the link between physical health and the environmental context of a person, thereby establishing that although medical interventions have their benefits however an improvement of one surrounding conditions often yields a positive result (McDonald, 2021).

Personal Perspective

Overall the article presents a criticism with strong underlying assumptions however, in my opinion, the usability of the definition of health cannot be completely disregarded rather its strengths should be taken into account. Approaching the concept of health in a wide context enables us to identify the factors which most often lead to diminished well-being, however; I believe that given its individualistic evaluation, the term health cannot be concretely defined as done by the WHO. Moreover, defining it as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being” – with an emphasis on the word “complete” – forces one to think about the extent of completeness and how it can be gauged. It seems to imply that no one in the world is fully healthy since it is logical to believe that individuals might not rate themselves perfectly on all of the three domains i.e., physical, mental, and social well-being at all times. I believe that there is a need to revise the definition and come up with one that can be applicable across cultures without bounding it to the mere presence or absence of certain factors.

References

Callahan, D. (1973). The WHO definition of ‘health’. *The Hastings Center Studies*, 1(3), 77-88.

McDonald, C. (2021). *Problems with the WHO Definition of ‘Health’*. Retrieved from <https://catherinemcdonald.net/problems-with-who-definition-health/>