

Health, illness and dying in Polish folk medicine

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ABSTRACT

In the past peasant families did not regard health as a value in itself. The low 'cultural status' of health was associated with the constant threat to it, the frailty of life and poverty which, as peasant diarist wrote, 'did not let one live'. 'Plague, war, and famine' would decimate the village population for centuries, and these people were help-less in the face of epidemic and natural disasters. For that reason death was treated as familiar part of the trajectory of human life, natural and indisputable.

A feature of folk culture, which influences behaviors in and attitudes towards illness among the peasant population, is co-occurrence mystical-magical elements. Mystical-magical acts influenced and still influence patterns of behaviors in illness and dying process which a peasant family exhibits. For example, illness was assumed to be caused by

spells, charms and magic; and the use of holy relics, amulets or talismans was believed to prevent illness. People were convinced that revelation, inspiration or clairvoyance made it easier to diagnose an illness whereas casting spells, charms, and the like would remove it effectively.

In our article we will discuss typical ways of coping with illness and dying processes', the determinants of behaviors in illness, emphasizing customs associated with illness, behavioral patterns, ways of expressing emotions, and fatalism as attitude towards illness and death. We will stress the importance of cultural and religious elements, and accentuate the special role played by women in coping with illness by using self-treatment and folk healing methods.

Key words: folk medicine, health, illness, dying
