

Comparing Healthcare Systems: India and the United States

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Before coming to India, I'll admit, I fit the American stereotype. I didn't know much about this country, the politics, or the how the healthcare system worked really at all. I had my assumptions and I knew a little bit about the country as a whole, but I knew nothing about the individual states. What I did know was how diverse it was, and is, and I knew a little about the culture just from friends, movies, and school. Just as many outsiders say that Americans are ignorant, I knew the stereotypes of India, however as everyone knows, stereotypes are rarely true. When I stepped off the plane, everything I thought I knew went out the window. We left the airport at 4am and I was surprised to see just how many people were awake and walking the streets. From the 8-hour drive to Mussoorie, I saw so many different cities and the vast diversity each had from the other. As we got further into the mountains, there seemed to be a little less congestion and noise, yet, still more busy and alive than I thought it would be. During this car ride, not only did I see stuff I was never expecting, but I got really excited. This country is so different from anything that I have ever seen before and I was more excited to see what was to come, and more importantly, to see how their hospitals worked because I had no guesses as to how they would function.

During the first two weeks here, we learned about the different types of hospitals, health care, and medical systems in both the Himalayas and in India. Since there is such a vast range of diversity here, the medical systems reflect that. There is every type of medicine here, each serving a different purpose, and each with their own theories and traditions. In the United States, there is really only one type of medicine that is recognized and used, that being biomedicine. Alternative medicine isn't as recognized or as prevalent. Moreover, there is such a stigma around the use of alternative medicine such as essential oils and yoga, that the people who do use it are

considered hippies and a little crazy. Although, it is becoming more popular, it is nowhere at the same level as it is in India. As in the States, it's really only used as a last resort when all other efforts fail.

Biomedicine, however, is the most dominant form of medicine in both the US and in India. The theory behind biomedicine is purely scientific fact and the fact that empirical evidence defines disease problems separate from culture. Indian hospitals are unique because there is such a broad spectrum of facilities, all in which offer the best medicine at the lowest cost. There are 5-star hospitals that cater to the very wealthy, where you will have your own private room and care is specialized, and then there are clinics on the side of the road where privacy is put on the back burner and one open room in which everyone can see you and watches you receive your treatment is the norm. Despite this vast difference, the quality of care is the same. There are government run hospitals that cater to the masses and provide universal medical care at a cost that is affordable. There is a board that illustrates all of the prices, you can have visitors come and visit whenever you want and for however long you want, and although its more run down and not the nicest of facilities, it is able to provide adequate treatment at a low cost. It is a place to go to get the best medical treatment for a fraction of the cost as everything about them is designed to make them affordable. However, most people find them frustrating because they are understaffed, under resourced, and overcrowded, but for the vast majority of people's needs, they are adequate.

There are then biomedical hospitals such as Max Super Specialty Hospital, which is the complete opposite. This hospital is made for the very wealthy and reflects modern priorities. This hospital is more expensive, as the facility is nicer, and rooms are private. The quality of care is slightly better as its more specialized compared to the government run hospitals, where they

really only care for general medicine. For the middle class, the specialty medicine is too expensive for them, and they want a little better of conditions than the government run hospitals. There are hospitals made just for them as well, which is more of a hybrid of the two, one being Landour Community Hospital. LCH is a Christian Hospital that is more specialized and a little nicer, but still affordable to the middle class. Additionally, pharmacists can act as clinics as they are able to sell drugs as well as diagnose and prescribe medicine, which is a quick and easy method that people often pick over going to a government hospital. This vast diversity in just the different types of biomedical facilities is one of the many examples of diversity of the types of health care systems they have here.

On the other side of the spectrum, there is Ayurvedic medicine, and Indian ethnomedical system, which is based on humoral theory in which the body is filled with humors and the balance of these three humors determine your state of health. The Dosha, or humors, are in a chronic state of fluctuation and any imbalance causes disease. Compared to biomedicine where there is a sharp line that if you're sick, you're sick and if you're healthy, you're healthy, in Dosha, no one is perfectly healthy, everyone is reflecting a change and everything you do affects your balance and changes your condition of health. Treatment is more individualized to medicine and lifestyle changes that will help you get back into your own personal balance.

In current Ayurvedic medicine, the hospitals are more of a hybrid of biomedicine and ayurvedic medicine, and these hospitals are government regulated. The doctors that work at these hospitals have to receive a bachelors in Ayurvedic medicine, which is 4 years of normal, biomedical medicine and then 2 years of ayurvedic medicine. However, some people don't trust these facilities and doctors because they are not traditionally an ayurvedic practice. So, in the case of receiving a more traditional experience and cure, people will reach out to tents on the

side of the road that practice Ayurveda, which is more traditional as the doctors of these facilities have been taught through their ancestors. Additionally, wealthy people will go to the tent to seek out an option other than what biomedicine has to offer – an otherwise confusing scene as the wealthy in this case will go to the same facility as the poor. One of the biggest problems that people will seek answers for in these facilities is fertility. Ayurvedic medicine, and more specifically the doctors that practice out of the tent on the side of the road, are able to promise a cure that can't be promised by westernized, biomedical doctors. Ayurvedic medicine is a more holistic, non-violent, peaceful, non-invasive, relaxing, comfortable medicine that the indigenous people are more willing to accept and trust.

Yoga is another alternative form of medicine that is practiced for medicinal purposes in India. I personally practice yoga on a regular basis and was very intrigued to hear about the medical benefits that it has on the body. Baba Ramdev is both a spiritual leader and a businessman, the first person to combine the two, and he was able to institutionalize yoga as a health practice. He promoted general yoga as health and believed that you could use yoga to treat chronic conditions such as asthma, hypertension, and diabetes. He was drawing on ideas from the colonial period and looking at biomedicine in particular and became angry because he saw how colonial medicine used vaccines to protect against diseases, which is imposing a foreign model of health onto the indigenous heritage. Using, his anger and frustration towards biomedicine, he created a new field of medicine by using what Indians already knew, yoga, to heal them. He believed that in using Indian medicine and ideas instead of western/European medicine, that he would gain more trust in the industry. Although some people do call him a fraud, he is respected in the community. Yoga uses prana, the belief that if you breathe air through your gross body, you can transfer that air into prana which will have different effects on

the body. The goal is to maximize your ability to control the prana to then channel it to the parts of the body where it will have the most healing effect. For example, if you have throat cancer and, channeling the prana to the throat will promote healing there. He would also use yoga as a treatment for TB and as a result, wanted to start replacing biomedical interventions with yoga.

In the US, yoga is used as an exercise and as meditation, it is not however, used as a treatment for diseases. Some people do use it to help hurt backs, but it is by no means used instead of westernized medicine. Overall, alternative medicine such as Ayurveda medicine and yoga are not used as treatment in the US and is definitely not as prevalent as it is in India. As we were learning about these different types of medicine, I found it very refreshing to learn about the different ways to be treated than just biomedicine, which is so prevalent and forced in the US. It was refreshing to learn about different beliefs and other ways to medicate and treat rather than just the westernized medicine that I am used to where it's very much a get diagnosed, prescribe medication, and you're fixed, system. Additionally, I feel like in India its more acceptable to use alternative medicine whereas in the United States it is more frowned upon, which makes it hard to try and learn about these different types of medicine.

Another big difference between the US and India health care systems is how they care for mental health. In the United States, mental health, especially over the past 5-10 years, has become a very big concern. Although many years ago it wasn't very supported, it now has a lot of support and people willing to help. Therapy is very prominent in the fact that most people go even if they don't have a very serious problem. Patients are able to go through acute care, receive a diagnosis, and are encouraged and go to therapy, which are well established. No one who reaches out for help is left to go home to no one, especially if a home is needed, they can either be sent under care of a family member or sent to community housing where they are under the

care of supervision and a supportive organization. There is an overall understanding, which is well established and works well. There is a lot of money poured into curing and helping people who suffer from mental illnesses. In India, there is still very much a stigma in place that prevents people from talking and getting help. There also seems to be a misunderstanding about what exactly mental health is. When Dr. George was talking about mental illnesses in India, he seemed to group people who suffer from depression and those who suffer from cerebral palsy all together – making it seem like those two diseases are similar and the patients who suffer from them deserve the same treatment, which is not the case. There is also very little support at the family level as families try to keep the people under wraps and their diseases quiet. Therapists are not used and if they are, people never say that they go to one. It's very much a don't ask, don't tell mentality about these diseases.

Another major difference between the two health care systems is sanitation, and the problem that comes with it. In Mussoorie, everyone lives on top of one another. There is constant traffic and movement. There are hills and sharp turns and just walking down the street takes concentration and thought. Because of this close proximity, diseases are easily spread. People throw their trash on the street, as this behavior has been imbedded in them for centuries. Taking a walk down the street, you will see trash everywhere. I think that was the biggest shock I had was just the sheer amount of littering that happens, it made me so sad. It also made me feel like everything that I do, and the rest of the world does for the environment doesn't mean anything because there is just so much waste here. Additionally, human and animal waste is everywhere. Looking around, everything looks dirty. People walk around barefoot, even though there is trash and sharp objects laying around all over the place. What seems like an obvious disrespect to the environment to an outsider like me, is the norm for the natives here. However, after living here

for a couple of weeks, I get it. If this behavior of unclean conditions is embedded in you since you were born, what difference does one more chip bag really make. If you and everyone you know throws trash on the ground, and there are no consequences, why would you stop?

On Wednesday May 29th, I had the opportunity to spend a day at the Landour Community Hospital. I was able to watch how the hospital was run after just a few minutes there I started seeing many differences in the way they go about healthcare and procedures. First off, there was absolutely no privacy anywhere. In the US, we have HIPAA, which protects patient's privacy. While in the ER, patients were just openly talking about what had happened to them and everyone there, including other patients were able to listen. There were no curtains for privacy and people would come in and out of the room unannounced. When we were in the consultation room, it was the same. There were two doctors in the room and patients would come in and talk to their doctor in front of everyone. Additionally, in the admitted patient ward, there were no curtains. The beds were packed in the room, leaving very little space between, causing patients to basically be on top of each other. If someone needed an assessment or any bedside procedure done on them, it was done in the bed and everyone, including other patients and their family members watched. Now obviously, this isn't a huge problem as its not hurting anyone's health, but it was just a big difference from what I have experienced in the US where everything is very confidential and private, and the privacy of the patient is the number 1 priority.

Another big difference I saw was with their sanitation protocols. While I was in the ER, the doctors didn't wear gloves when assessing their patients. Even when dressing a wound or applying casts, no gloves were worn. The only time I saw a doctor wear gloves was when they took out sutures or they were actually cleaning a wound, and even then, some didn't. In the US, anytime you walk into a patient's room, gloves are worn. Anytime you need to clean a wound,

change a dressing, or anytime you are touching the inside of the body, it's a sterile procedure. There are handwashing stations everywhere and hand sanitizer outside and inside every room. At LCH, I saw one bottle of hand sanitizer and only one doctor ever wash his hands. Now, I'm not saying it's wrong at all, it's just something so different that was very shocking to witness especially because sanitation, hand washing, and wearing gloves is so ingrained in us in the States.

I also have never experienced such a quiet hospital. Every health care facility in the US I have ever been in has never silent. There are always monitors beeping, IVs going off, people in the hallways talking, overhead announcements calling codes, and busy nurse's stations. When we walked the halls of LCH, it almost seemed abandoned. The second floor was dark, there was no one at the nurse's station and the two patient wards were either empty or had 2 patients in them. Most of the private rooms were locked, and the labor and delivery ward was empty. The third floor was completely deserted – there were no lights on, and the OR was completely silent. The only sign of life up there was one woman who was mopping the floor. The first floor, where all of the patients were, was a little bit livelier. In the ER, family members would come in and out of the door. In the consulting room, doctors, nurses, and patients would go from room to room. If a patient was given a prescription, they would go down to the pharmacy and get the drugs right away. If a patient needed an x-ray, they would bring the slip saying what they needed done, and then hobble to the x-ray room. There were no wheelchairs used for transport, which is the standard in the US. Additionally, in patients who broke their leg, after they were casted up, they hopped to their car, no crutches were used. Although the first floor was more alive, it was still not as crazy or as loud as a US hospital.

After experiencing a day at the LCH and listening to lectures about how the Indian health care system works, I now have a much better understanding and respect for it. Not only do I understand more about this healthcare system, but I know more about India as a whole, and that is something I could not be more grateful for. I am so inspired how people here are so tough, which is really the only way I can describe it. I saw a child who had been climbing a fence and the top of it pierced through his chest, missing his heart by inches. When the doctor was removing some of his stitches and the poor boy didn't even flinch. Another patient was walking around all by himself on a broken foot before they knew it was broken. I think there is a special quality that these people possess that we, in the US, could all adopt. Health care is so precious here and is only used if it's an absolute necessity. Although that is not always the best way to live, I think we could use a little more of that mentality in the States. Over the past couple of weeks, I have seen a totally different way of life. It not only makes me more aware of my surroundings, but it has taught me that the only important thing in life is who you spend it with and the people you surround yourself with. It's so refreshing to see a country where materialistic things don't matter and how happy and proud people are of their family and where they come from. This trip is one that has definitely changed me for the better and one that I will never forget. India, despite its shortcomings, is a country that we can all and should learn from.