

THEME 03

A return to traditional healthcare

HEALTHCARE

TRADITIONS

TECHNOLOGY

While the modern conception of health is focused on physical visible symptoms, debates about sleep, obesity, exercise, nutrition and mental health are triggering a paradigm shift for health. As modern lifestyles wreak havoc on all of these traditional aspects of health, a return to traditional healthcare, still found in many non-western cultures, is appearing.

Our observations

- Growing awareness about the [role of sleep](#) is changing attitudes towards sleep and fueling scientific research and technological innovation. While Fitbit data shows that Americans sleep far too little, according to the [Chinese Sleep Research Society](#), 56% of Chinese people also sleep poorly, 38% have experienced insomnia, and nearly 60% of those born after 1995 use smartphones for as long as 80 minutes before going to bed. Meanwhile, recent discoveries in biology, neuroscience, genomics and technology could radically transform sleep patterns.
- Last week, we noted the growing awareness of [mental health](#). Popular culture is reducing stigma by exploring mental health issues, famous people are opening up about their mental health, the use of antidepressants is surging, an increasing number of products are designed to reduce anxiety, and doctors more frequently diagnose mental health disorders.
- The Huffington Post documents a paradigm shift for thinking about [obesity](#). To be sure, obesity is rapidly rising. Since 1980, the obesity rate has doubled in 73 countries and increased in 113 others. Nearly 80% of Americans meet the clinical definition of obese. However, growing awareness of the obesity crisis is triggering a paradigm shift. Most importantly, diets do not work: since 1959, research has shown that 95-98% of attempts to lose weight fail and that two-thirds of dieters gain back more than they initially lost. The decisive factor in obesity care was not the diet patients went on, but how much attention and support they received while they were on it. What's more, anywhere from one-third to three-quarters of people classified as obese are metabolically healthy. Unfit skinny people are twice as likely to get diabetes as fit fat people.
- The obesity crisis is closely linked to the type of food people are eating. The Huffington Post also reports that [diet](#) is the leading cause of death in the United States, responsible for more than five times the fatalities of gun violence and car accidents combined. However, despite the obesity crisis, Americans actually consume fewer calories than in 2003. All of our biological systems for regulating energy, hunger and satiety get thrown off when we eat foods that are high in sugar, low in fiber and injected with additives: these "ultra-processed foods" now make up [60%](#) of the calories consumed by Americans.



Connecting the dots

From the 17th century onwards, modern thinkers such as Descartes, Newton and Kant laid the foundation for a modern conception of health, which increasingly omitted traditional aspects of health. Broadly speaking, as they presented man as a rational subject detached from its objectified environment, man's health was increasingly characterized by its physicality (detached from the mind and the environment). During this time, a [revolution](#) of health advanced practices in surgery, physiology, anatomy, vaccination, and hygiene - all centered on more closely observing the physical human body. This perspective on health also radically "disenchanted" previous conceptions of health. Indeed, [ancient Greek medicine](#), for example, blurred spirituality and physicality: they believed that health was shaped by beliefs, mindset, trauma, and diet. The physical conception of health relegated these (enchanted) ideas to the realm of "pseudoscience". However, from the 20th century onwards, with the rise of, for example, psychoanalysis, [psychosomatics](#), and [biosemiotics](#), cracks began to show in this narrative. What's more, modern life is increasingly uprooting traditional aspects of health (e.g. sleep, exercise, food, mental health). Traditionally, these aspects were more deeply embedded in daily life. In traditional societies, patterns of sleep are more closely ritualized in accordance with dusk and dawn, physical labor provides plenty of exercise, food is non-processed and grown locally, and mental wellbeing is deeply embedded in spirituality, religion and community. However, modern life wreaks havoc on all of these aspects of health. Sleep is threatened by blurring borders between work and home, digital technology and immersive entertainment at home. Exercise is threatened by the shift from physical labor to sedentary cognitive work. Nutrition is

threatened by economically efficient processing of food. And mental health is threatened by loss of community, spirituality, nature, and the threat to sleep, exercise and food.

The current growing awareness about sleep, exercise, food and mental health indicates a return to traditional thinking about health. This paradigm shift reintegrates physicality with psychological wellbeing and the broader environment. A holistic perspective on health is thus reemerging. Interestingly, such a conception of health has always been part of non-western cultures. In [Islamic medical literature](#), spiritual medicine cannot be separated completely from physical medicine: mental medicine is a fundamental branch of Islamic medicine known as al-Tibb al-Ruhani. In [Chinese medicine](#), man is regarded as a small universe: only when physiological functions, body, mind and the outside environment coexist in perfect harmony, a person is in good health (causes of diseases are almost equally divided into six physical aspects and seven emotional factors). However, these cultural comparisons do not suggest a re-enchantment of the world: rather, science is increasingly documenting the necessity to broaden modern conceptions of health (e.g. [meditation](#), [yoga](#), [rethinking diet](#), [presence of nature](#), [healthy infrastructure](#)). As such, much that is not considered "medicine" could become fundamental to a healthy lifestyle. Consequently, technological innovation will increasingly tackle these aspects of health (e.g. [meditation apps](#), [sleep technology](#), [nutrition apps](#), [fitness tech](#)). What's more, the healthcare industry is also researching technologies with a more holistic view of the human body that could replace regular medicine (e.g. [electroceuticals](#), [genetic therapy](#), [implantable drug-making cells](#), [personalized medicine](#)).

Implications

- From the home to the city, shaping the environment to improve human wellbeing is gaining traction. While feng shui is still regarded as pseudoscience in the west, [healthy urban design](#) increasingly occupies western mindsets (i.e. through healthy urban infrastructure as we have [noted](#) before). As the [walls of the home are breaking down](#) and homes become [smaller](#), new ways to adapt interior design to wellbeing will also emerge (e.g. [Big Tech](#) concepts, [robotic furniture](#)).
- The role of traditional spaces of health could change (e.g. hospitals, drugstores). JWT Intelligence notes that [drugstores](#) are expanding their offerings in an effort to become enjoyable destinations for complete wellbeing, which could also apply to hospitals (i.e. we have previously documented the rise of [medical tourism](#)).
- As sleep, exercise, food and mental health become fundamental components of a healthy lifestyle, these will all become "meaningful consumption", especially in [post-materialist](#) high-income societies.