

Regional

Health communication closely tied to culture

It's hard to turn on a TV show or read a magazine or newspaper without coming across a story regarding health. Its dominance in the media reflects how important the subject is to all of us. To help the media, along with educators and even health practitioners do a better job of communicating these issues, is the growing field of health communication. And in this globalized world, cultural differences can play a big role in how health issues are communicated.

"For a lot of people culture is a good thing," said Wai Cheah, an associate professor in the department of speech communication at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "But from my personal experience, there are also some not very good things about culture. A good example is the passing of my mother. To this day I blame the culture that I was brought up in for essentially taking my mother from me.

"She died when I was 9," Cheah said. "What happened was that every year my mother went to a shaman for some guidance and to see what the new year would be like. At the age of 38 she went to the shaman and during the conversation the shaman told my mother that she was not going to pass the age of 39. When she got sick she did not seek medical help very early on. She ultimately ended up having cancer that spread very quickly and she passed away in about a week. And that is essentially why I got into health communication and specifically why I look at how culture can help people make good or bad decisions when it comes to life and death situations."

A native of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Cheah obtained his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in communication from the University of Kentucky. By its nature, he explained, health communication is a very interdisciplinary field, which means a lot of extra work



Courtesy of Benjamin D.

Dr. Cheah during a travel to Chiang Mai, Thailand.

learning from different disciplines in order to really understand the issues at hand.

"When we talk about academia we should not just stick to our one field, particularly in the area of health communication," said Cheah. "Most health communication scholars essentially work with other individuals from different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, public health and even medicine." Other scholars also work in the area of public policy.

"That is essentially very, very critical when we talk about the healthcare system in the United States," he said. "There are a lot of people complaining about 'Obamacare.' My point is let's give it a try and see what happens in the next few years before we kill the thing." Cheah said that he believes that health care is really a human right and not a privilege.

"In Malaysia all of us have access to healthcare. And when I came to the U.S. I found the system was different and I still find it interesting being in this particular system," he said. Interestingly he thinks some churches play a big role in health communication.

"I think that in African-American communities they have essentially utilized the pastor as the conveyer of information," he said. "In fact, some of my colleagues in health communication have started that line of work. And somehow I think it's working." As an expert, Cheah has encountered a lot of myths or misinformation about health issues.

"A lot of lay people always think that the doctor is always correct, but that's not always the case," he said. "That is why even when I teach my students in my health communication classes, I always say there is no harm in getting a second opinion. Try to seek as much information as possible." Cheah knows of a colleague who once was diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s, well before there was any type of effective treatment. It

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happened not to be true.

"This is just another example of medical doctors not being right all the time," Cheah said. "I think partly it has to do with society because we always put the physician on a pedestal and assume they are always right. But in reality that is not the case." Another issue today is that many people oftentimes look to the Internet as their first source of health advice.

"To some extent technology is a tool," he said. "It comes with some positive perks, but also some negatives. If you are a health authority you can definitely disseminate the right kind of information using the Internet. But the downside is that anyone can put information out there. So I think that as a health communication scholar and as a teacher I always tell students it is important for them to know what kind of information they are getting." He advises everyone to use critical thinking when getting information from the Internet.

"Is the information coming from the right authority? Do they have the necessary credentials to tell you what is right and what is wrong? With technology nowadays, medical professionals have utilized technology that will enable people to run some tests on their own," Cheah said. "They can participate in some online quizzes or they may have a chat with physicians, and that can save them a very expensive trip to the emergency room."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@