

Foreword

by Bernard Ortiz de Montellano

As a nation, we spend billions of dollars on unproven nostrums, nonexistent “energies,” and various therapeutic touches and massages. The Federal Drug Administration has been rendered impotent by the thinly disguised subterfuge of labeling these substances as “food supplements.” These remedies are legitimized by pseudoscientific claims for “quantum healing” or “hydrinos,” or by ultra-relativistic postmodernist claims that “all theories are equally valid” or that scientific evidence is not relevant because “there are different ways of knowing.” The result is that “natural” or “alternative” methods and remedies are held to be superior to those of Western biomedicine, which is accused of being impersonal and reductionist. This has led to wasting billions of dollars on ineffective remedies, severe diseases not being treated until it is too late, and unforeseen adverse drug interactions. On the other hand, the attitude of most biomedically trained health personnel—who consider traditional healers quacks or superstitious charlatans—is just as unfortunate. In developing countries this attitude means that millions of people do not get either effective biomedicine or the possible benefits of an effective cooperation between traditional and biomedical healers. There is much that traditional healers can offer medicine, not only in physiologically active compounds derived from herbal medicine, but also in treating illness as a holistic entity with interacting cultural, psychological, and physiological components.

This volume represents medical anthropology at its best. It strikes a bal-

ance between the hubris of biomedicine and an uncritical postmodernism. It is a state-of-the-art survey of healers, and will be a mandatory reference because of its breadth of coverage, the authoritativeness of its authors, and the excellence of its bibliography. The chapters on midwives, as well as Paul and McMahon's treatment of bonesetters, are particularly good. The inclusion of physicians, nurses, and social workers among healers studied is a novel and welcome feature.

Much has been written on medicine in Mesoamerica, but it is widely dispersed and in need of updating. The range and timeliness of this volume fills this need and makes it a welcome and indispensable addition to the literature.