

# Sherpas and Sickness

**Dr Penny Dawson And Dr Jamie Uhrig**

*Photographs 27 — 30*

In the minds of western visitors to the Himalaya there are always memories of people who stand out: the Sherpas. Many climbers and trekkers wish that they could get to know Sherpas better and they often find the behaviour of even their oldest Sherpa friends hard to understand.

There are several reasons why it is difficult for westerners to understand Sherpas. Westerners rarely spend a lot of time with their Sherpa acquaintances; two months is a short time in which to develop understanding. It is also very rare for westerners to spend much time with Sherpanis.<sup>1</sup> Often the wife or girlfriend of a Sherpa friend is only seen serving cups of tea and speaking to her husband in a foreign language. Visitors therefore fail to meet half of the Sherpa population, and it is the Sherpanis who stay in the village and maintain the everyday tribal traditions. Westerners also have trouble understanding Sherpas because they are stuck in an employer-employee relationship, and it is hard for Sherpas to view their employers as people with whom they can share information about their lives. It is not unusual for a Sherpa to beg money or to talk with his western employer about village customs, but visitors rarely hear about medical problems, village conflicts, or family troubles.

One of the things that westerners find most difficult to understand about Sherpas is their beliefs and practices with regard to their health. It is hard to understand a Sherpa who begs medicine for his cough but refuses to see a doctor for his abdominal pain. Likewise they cannot understand a Sherpa whose wife uses family planning but who lets his blind mother sit in a dark corner of his house when she has easily-cured cataracts in her eyes.

Westerners who try to ask Sherpas about these paradoxes often receive unsatisfactory answers to their questions, and they are often left with a sense of despair of ever understanding Sherpa attitudes to illness. Based on our experience of treating Sherpas at Kunde Hospital in the Khumbu Himal of Nepal, and more importantly on our experiences living for two years in a Sherpa village, we can begin to explain some Sherpa behaviour that is most confusing to westerners.

Here we will describe some of the most common Sherpa beliefs about disease and illness. Part of the discussion will be about what Sherpas believe causes disease, and the four major types of medical practitioners will then be described. Our descriptions and analyses are based on living with Khumbu Sherpas, and do not apply to Sherpas from the Solu region or other parts of Nepal. We also have very little contact with Kathmandu Sherpas who are different from their village counterparts. It is impossible to write a guidebook to the Sherpa mind, and our descriptions are only meant as a basis for understanding.

One of the most important concepts in trying to understand Sherpa views on illness is that Sherpas can understand and accept two separate and (to us) mutually incompatible theories of what causes disease. We believe that the



27 *A village lama in the village of Kundu*

*Photo: Penny Dawson & Jamie Uhrig*



28 *A sick Sherpani at the hospital in Kundu*

*Photo: Penny Dawson & Jamie Uhrig*

superficial skin infection impetigo is caused by bacteria that can be seen in our hospital microscope, and many Sherpas also accept this germ theory. A Sherpa who believes this theory may at the same time believe that he picked up his impetigo infection by making a water spirit angry. Most Sherpas believe two theories at the same time and see nothing wrong or strange in doing so.

The most common illnesses among Khumbu Sherpas are simple ones. Upper respiratory infections like the common cold and bronchitis are very common, as are skin infections like impetigo and boils. Abdominal pain from alcohol and food is common and vomiting and diarrhea are two problems that every Sherpa knows well. Children are also often infected with roundworm and scabies, and it is unusual for children to escape episodes of conjunctivitis or pinkeye. Tuberculosis is now rare in the Khumbu following years of treatment of this disease at Kunde Hospital.

One of the most popular explanations for sickness in a Sherpa is making a *lu* angry. *Lus* are water spirits that are ubiquitous in the Khumbu; they are usually benign spirits that dwell at springs or places where streams bubble out over rocks. *Lus* also live in lakes, and there is an easily angered *lu* that lives in Gokyo lake in the Khumbu. If one urinates or defecates or washes dirty things near a *lu*'s dwelling place, the *lu* will become angry and will cause disease in the offender. Typical illnesses caused by angry *lus* are visible ones; impetigo, boils, abscesses, pimples, and skin rashes are the most common. A very angry *lu* can cause serious illness, but this is uncommon. Treatment of disease caused by an angry *lu* is often undertaken with the help of a *lhawa* or spirit medium.

The second major group of spirits that can cause illness is what we call ghosts. The Sherpas know normal ghosts as *hrindi*, but they are more concerned about a more malignant variety of ghost called a *nerpa*. *Nerpas* are the ghosts of people who have died in bad circumstances: suicide, murder, or violent death. The spirit of a Sherpa who has not had his funeral rites properly performed can also become a *nerpa*, and many Sherpas believe that the spirits of unpopular people become *nerpas* when they die. The range of illnesses that can be caused by *nerpas* is very wide, and these diseases are often serious and sometimes fatal. We have seen sudden death, heart attack, heart failure and pneumonia attributed to them. A ghost can attack a person for no apparent reason, and several manoeuvres can be used to avoid them, like putting thorns on the trail to keep a *nerpa* from following. Like water spirits, ghosts do not actually possess a person or enter the body, but cause harm by acting from outside the body. If a Sherpa believes that a *nerpa* may be causing his illness he will waste no time in consulting a *lama*, a *lhawa*, or an *amjik* (a Tibetan doctor).

Another major cause of illness in the Sherpa world is poison. Poisons are believed to be administered to unsuspecting Sherpas by a Sherpa woman who wishes to obtain some of her victim's merit and thus become rich. Sherpanis who poison people are easily characterised: they are usually old, have moles on their faces, and are said to be selfish. A Sherpani prepares a small amount of poison from a recipe known only to her and then slips it into a cup of tea or liquor by putting it under her thumbnail and surreptitiously slipping her thumb into the drink. Poisons are believed to cause many gastrointestinal diseases and can cause death. Vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal swelling and chronic abdominal pain are





29 A Sherpa child with the superficial skin infection, impetigo

Photo: Penny Dawson & Jamie Uhrig



30 A sick Sherpa at the hospital in Kunde

Photo: Penny Dawson & Jamie Uhrig

all symptoms of poisoning. *Amjiks* (Tibetan doctors) can prepare herbal antidotes for poisons, but Sherpas often view the outcome of poisoning fatalistically and simply wait for the illness to take its course. Gold caps on teeth are said to protect Sherpas against poisoning; many westerners comment on how many Sherpas and Sherpanis have gold caps on their teeth. Stories about poisoning and women who give poisons are very popular and Sherpas often tell poisoning stories when they sit around fires in the evening.

The final major cause of illness is *teep*, or pollution. There are many sources of pollution in the Sherpa world, and if an individual comes in contact with too many polluting things over a short period of time, he or she will fall sick. The causes of pollution include contact with dead people or their belongings, childbirth, or blood, stool and urine. Doctors often must perform polluting acts and are very liable to sickness from too much *teep*. Conjunctivitis, fits, fatigue and vague illnesses in children are all caused by pollution. Avoidance of contact with polluting things is the only way to prevent diseases caused by *teep*, though shortly after a polluting act some of the danger of disease can be lessened by burning fragrant plants. After an illness has begun, help from a *lama* is requested; *lamas* often give water that has been blessed to rinse out eyes affected by conjunctivitis.

There are some illnesses that Sherpas do not believe are due to any of the above causes. Falls, broken bones, worms, burns, and most common colds are believed to be due to plain bad luck. Sherpas have their own complicated beliefs about the causes of cretinism and depression after childbirth and elaborate precautions are taken to avoid these two problems.

Sherpas who fall sick in the Khumbu are able to take advantage of any one or all of the four kinds of medical systems there. *Lamas*, *lhawas* (spirit mediums), *amjiks* (Tibetan doctors) and western doctors are the choices available. If they get sick away from home their choice of medical practitioners may be more limited.

Most of the reincarnate *lamas* and village *lamas* in the Khumbu admit that they cannot cure illness. They are able to identify what is causing some illness by divining, reading thoughts, and examining horoscopes, and then they can perform the appropriate religious ceremony to give the patient good luck or spiritual strength to overcome the illness. The influence of the two reincarnate *lamas* in the Khumbu is strong and they are often consulted for help or advice.

The *lhawas* or spirit mediums are colourful characters and often attract the attention of tourists and anthropologists. A Sherpa *lhawa* is a diagnostician who goes into a trance and finds out which kind of spirit is causing a disease. He then comes out of trance and tells the patients what acts he should perform to rid himself of the bad influence of the *lu* or *nerpa*. Most spiritual prescriptions involve reading holy books or offering small gifts to an offended spirit. The performances of *lhawas* in trance are quite spectacular and Sherpas feel it is worthwhile to pay the high fees they charge. *Lamas* and Buddhist monks do not put much faith in the *lhawas* but many Sherpas have great faith in their ability to find the cause of a disease. *Lhawas* may also be consulted for sickness in domestic animals.

There are two *amjiks* in the Khumbu. They diagnose illness by asking about symptoms and a urine examination is their most important diagnostic manoeuvre. An *amjik* often prescribes pills that he has prepared from medicinal plants; they also recognise *lus* and *nerpas* as causes of disease and they are very

good at treating cases of poisoning.

Western medicine is a new medical system for Sherpas and although many Sherpas seem accepting of western medicine, usually they just try it out to see if it works or use it for illness when they know it is effective. Kunde Hospital has a good reputation for treating burns, wounds, worms, and broken bones. Western medicine is usually free or very cheap when it is begged from westerners and as a result tablets are often not valued very much. Sporadic amateur medical care provided by climbers and trekkers has helped western medicine to gain a reputation as second-best medicine. Surgery is a healing method greatly feared by Sherpas, as most people requiring surgery in Nepal are sick enough to die, and they often do.

When a Sherpa falls sick he chooses which practitioner he will consult first depending on his illness, but he will rarely exclude any of the forms of medicine if his illness is serious enough. If he has a skin infection he might first consult the *lhawa* and then go to the hospital or health post for antibiotics. If he feels he has been poisoned he will send someone to the *anjik* to obtain some herbal tablets and then to the *lama* to request a religious ceremony for strength. If he is wasting away with tuberculosis he may first consult a *lhawa* and perform the necessary actions to rid himself of the influence of a spirit before asking the western doctor what he thinks is wrong. These days most of the different kinds of practitioners in the Khumbu do not disparage the work of the other kinds of practitioners in order to obtain the primary consultation; even referrals are becoming more common. The patient or his family is allowed to decide whom to ask for help first, and shopping for a doctor is not uncommon.

The behaviour of a sick Sherpa also depends on what he thinks is causing the disease. If the disease is not yet diagnosed or if a serious diagnosis is being entertained, fear determines his action. Since it is very bad for his personal spirit to wander outside his home after death, he may prefer to stay home in case he dies. He may eat foods that he has been told will help him recover, or he may decide not to eat at all. Gossip in the village about the cause or probable outcome of his illness may be bad for the illness, so secrecy is kept and talk about the sickness is kept inside the home.

There is very little that westerners can do in order to help their Sherpa friends to get appropriate medical care. Sherpas often request free medicines from westerners and it is hard to refuse to give a few drugs; year-round professional medical care is available for all Sherpas through Kunde Hospital, so giving a bit of free medicine to a Sherpa often does more harm than good. Sherpas decide for themselves what is the best form of medical care for their illness; they keep all doors open, and usually things work out for the best.

<sup>(1)</sup> The proper term for the women is *Sherpeni* but common English usage is *Sherpani*.