Abstract

An analysis of the logic of one of the commonest health beliefs in rural areas of Mexico is made, taking as a starting point testimonies collected in the area of Ocuituco, in the state of Morelos. This belief suggests that a pregnant woman is in danger of having a harelipped baby during a solar eclipse. The importance of the knowledge about the logic of this kind of beliefs is discussed from a public health perspective. These beliefs are associated with specific forms of suffering and give way to particular preventive measures which must be taken into account if the efficacy of health programs is to be increased. The interrelation of these beliefs with other traditional elements (such as the "loss of the shadow" and the "hot-cold theory") is discussed. Also, some of the already existing interpretations of this belief which seek to link the "loss of the shadow" with the solar eclipse belief are reviewed. Finally, an alternative interpretation of this belief is made from a structuralist methodological perspective. This interpretation is grounded in the Nahuatl myth on the creation of the sun and the moon, and in an analysis of the nature of rabbits in the Nahuatl culture, according to historic secondary sources. It is suggested that the belief about the danger of a solar eclipse must be interpreted in connection to the "hot-cold theory", but not to the "loss of the shadow". This paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of this type of research within the public health field, as it enables us both to understand the underlying logic of this type of conceptions, and to reinforce the dialogue between modern and alternative medicine, so that the daily encounter between these two types of medicine can be facilitated.

Keywords

pregnancy; cleft lip; cleft palate; cross-cultural comparison; Mexico.