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LETTERS

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PINPOINTING HEALTH

If there is one issue that preoccupies our society, it is health. The mainstream media continually run stories on the health of individuals, society in general, or institutions, as well as exposés of both the failure of health care provision and its spiralling cost.

The famed American researcher, physician and author Lewis Thomas vividly captured this fixation on health: "As a people, we have become obsessed with Health. There is something fundamentally, radically unhealthy about all this. We do not seem to be seeking more exuberance in living as much as staving off failure, putting off dying."

Of late, there has been an emerging debate as to what is meant by health, focusing on the World Health Organization declarations dating back to its foundation in 1948. At that time, its lofty goal was "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health", which was defined as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

Some commentators have declared this to be simply a bad definition. Richard Smith, previous editor of the *BMJ*, opines: "It's a ludicrous definition that would leave most of us unhealthy most of the time".

The *Lancet* has also weighed into the debate with its own definition, namely that health is "the ability to adapt". Quite appropriate, perhaps, in the year celebrating Charles Darwin's contributions to the theory of evolution! Interestingly, this concept has been borrowed from the French physician Georges Canguilhem, who in 1943 described health not as something defined statistically or mechanistically, but rather as the ability to adapt to one's environment.

This begs the question: is this debate about the definition of health simply academic hot air and obfuscation? The average citizen would certainly have no difficulty understanding what health means: a state of wellbeing. The rest is simply superfluous.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

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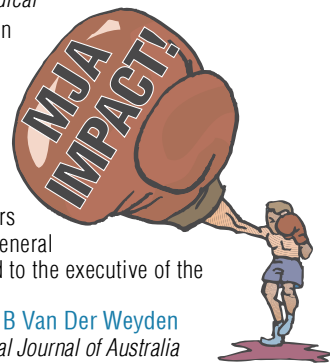
153 BOOKS RECEIVED

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