



## **Sherpa beliefs and Western medicine: providing health care at Kunde Hospital, Nepal**

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In 1966 Sir Edmund Hillary built a small hospital in the village of Kunde to provide health care services to the mainly Sherpa people of the Mt Everest area in Nepal. Kunde Hospital, part of a wider aid programme to assist these people renowned for their role in Himalayan mountaineering, has become the main provider of Western medical services to approximately three and a half thousand people of the villages of Khumbu as well as a similar number from adjacent areas. The history of the hospital is largely the history of Western medicine in this mountainous, remote part of Nepal. The hospital is run by Sir Edmund Hillary and the Himalayan Trust from New Zealand with finance from the Sir Edmund Hillary Foundation of Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency and has been staffed by volunteer overseas doctors and local Sherpa staff. Between 1996 and 1998 my husband and I were the volunteers running Kunde Hospital. My conclusion at the end of our time at Kunde was that despite enormous change throughout the region, largely brought about by the increase in tourism and development, Sherpa beliefs about sickness remained strong and were the key to understanding not only what Sherpa people did when they were sick but also to understanding how the hospital responded to sickness among the Sherpa.

The aim of this paper is to explore historically the enduring nature of Sherpa beliefs and practices about ill health using hospital records, correspondence, oral sources, both Sherpa and overseas medical staff, and my own participant observation. Secondary sources about the Sherpa are extensive and provide both scholarly discussion and historical reference points. While earlier sociological studies discussing health issues focused on the belief in and control of invisible beings more recent studies have highlighted change and modernisation. Change has occurred regarding sickness and health but the questions are how much, in what way and in what context?

Polarising health care into Sherpa beliefs versus Western medicine/modernisation fails to take into account the complexity and layering of what has happened and is

happening among the Sherpa of Khumbu. This paper is part of my ongoing doctoral study which looks at the history of Kunde Hospital from different perspectives: Sir Edmund Hillary and the Himalayan Trust who built and run the hospital; the Sherpa who are the main users of the hospital services; the hospital as a Western medicine project and the hospital and international aid.