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Mental Models of Illness in Indonesia

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Abstract: Avoiding and treating illness is vital to a person's wellbeing. Yet, people vary in their conceptions of the causes, transmission, prevention, and treatment of everyday illnesses such as colds and the flu. In semi-structured interviews, we examined U.S. and Indonesian adults' beliefs about these illnesses, and explored an illness concept that is pervasive in Indonesian culture, "masuk angin" (literally "trapped wind"). The results revealed some interesting findings. First, Indonesians' conceptions of colds and flu were less differentiated than U.S. participants'. Second, Indonesians often described illness transmission in terms of environmental factors (e.g., the weather), whereas U.S. participants described interpersonal factors (e.g., touching sick people). Third, while most participants focused on medical treatments for colds and flu, Indonesian novices described behavioral treatments for masuk angin (e.g., scraping). Finally, Indonesian medical experts were reluctant to provide explanations for masuk angin, either dismissing it as illusory or integrating it into the colds/flu category.