

## Case study: oral rehydration therapy in Pakistan

Source: Cecil G. Helman, *Culture, Health and Illness*, Fifth edition, Hodder Arnold 2007

A study by the Mulls<sup>1</sup> in rural Pakistan showed widespread ignorance or rejection of oral rehydration therapy (ORT) by mothers. This was despite the fact that the use of ORT has been promoted on a national level by the Ministry of Health since 1983, and packets of oral rehydration solution (ORS) are available free of charge through government health outlets; also more than 18 millions packets of ORS are produced annually by Pakistan's own pharmaceutical industry. The researchers found that many of the mothers were ignorant of how the ORS should be used, and some of them saw the diarrhoea (which was very common in that area) as a natural and expected part of teething and growing up and not as an illness. Some believed it was dangerous to try to stop the diarrhoea, lest the trapped "heat" within it spread to the brain and caused a fever. Others explained infant diarrhoea as caused by certain folk illnesses such as *nazar* (evil eye), *jinn*s (malevolent spirits) or *sutt* (a sunken or fallen fontanelle said to cause difficulty in infant sucking), which should be treated with traditional remedies or by traditional healers without recourse to OT. Some of these mothers did not connect the fallen fontanelle with severe dehydration, and tried to raise it by applying sticky substances to the top of the infant's head or pushing up on the hard palate with finger. Many mothers in the group saw diarrhoea as a "hot" illness which required a "cold" form of treatment, such as a change in maternal diet or giving certain foods and herbs to the infant, in order to restore the sick infant to a normal temperature. They classified most Western medicines, such as antibiotics and even vitamins, as also "hot", and therefore inappropriate for a diarrhoeal child. A few even rejected ORS (which contains salt) because they thought that salt "was bad for diarrhoea".

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<sup>1</sup> Mull JD., Mull DS., Mothers' concepts of childhood diarrhea in rural Pakistan: what ORT program planners should know; in: [Soc Sci Med.](#) 1988;27(1):53-67.