

# Letters

## Definitions

SIR

Robin Downie (1) argues not only that definitions are not always necessary but that they can be undesirable if they 'foreclose speculation'. In support of the former assertion he says 'we can all meet a friend at 8pm for dinner without being able to define time or space, and medical treatment can proceed independently of definitions of disease or health'.

This is such an enormous philosophical claim and the implications for health care practice are no less sizeable, that it cannot be let pass. Downie says that we do not need definitions of space and time to meet another person at a particular place and time. However, what he should be saying is that we do not need *comprehensive* definitions of space and time to do this. Downie's claim, as he puts it, is false, since in order to say meaningfully: 'I shall meet you outside Mamma Mia's Pizza Parlour at 8pm this evening' *some* definition of space and time is both necessary and implicit. If I understand that the pizza parlour cannot be in the same place as the church and that its location is relative to the position of other buildings, and if I understand that 8pm is not 7am then although I do not have a physicist's concept of space-time I most certainly do have a clear and useful definition of space and time. At the very least, to make the dinner arrangement, one has to have an ostensive definition of space and time (even if I could not tell the time and did not have even a rudimentary understanding of the word 'space', if I were to meet my friend I would have to be told 'I shall meet you *there* not *there* when the hands of this watch are *here* - you must come when it is *dark* not when it is *light*').

Now, if it is true that definitions are essential for us to deal with non-problematic everyday matters, how

much more important they must be in matters which involve vital human values such as health. To think that they are not important in such cases is simply to aim to preserve the status quo by default rather than argument. A parallel illustrates this point: space and time can be defined in *various* ways but if the words are to make any sense they must be defined in *some* way. Exactly the same is true of health. The World Health Organisation defines 'health' in one way, I define it in another, most governments define it in yet another. Because of this pluralism, and because most people do not find the word 'health' problematic in everyday use, Downie concludes that discussion of the issue will not be fruitful and that a definition is not required. But look what this view implies. Just as actually *doing something* - meeting a person at an arranged place and time - acts implicitly to confirm (to both parties) that their definitions of space and time are accurate, so the *everyday doing* of technical activities (those mainly medical things done within a health service, for instance) in the name of health confirms that traditional (implicit) definitions of health are accurate. But just as there is a lot more to space and time than hours and metres so there is a lot more to a full, defensible and ethical theory of health than stethoscopes, bed pans and surgical skills, as those who try to develop philosophical theories of health (from which practically useful definitions can be derived) are passionately aware.

The act of clarifying and developing philosophically sound definitions of concepts central to human life should not be devalued. It is not this task which 'forecloses speculation', far from it. Rather it is the casual acceptance of evolved, often unplanned and often unsatisfactory practices as defining what ought to be the case that does this.

DAVID SEEDHOUSE  
Department of Psychiatry and  
Behavioural Science,  
University of Auckland,  
Private Bag,  
New Zealand

## Reference

- (1) Downie R S. Definition. *Journal of medical ethics* 1994; 20: 181-184.

## Response to Seedhouse

SIR

David Seedhouse claims that 'if we understand that the Pizza Parlour cannot be in the same place as the church ... and that 8 pm is not 7 pm ... I most certainly do have a clear and useful definition of space and time'. But what is it? He doesn't say. Perhaps, as he goes on to suggest, what is involved is an ostensive definition of space and time. But pointing at locations or dials is not any kind of definition of space and time, because the very process of pointing, or any spatial or temporal description whatsoever, presupposes that one already has an awareness of space and time. The ideas of space and time, as Kant pointed out (1), are integral to human consciousness and therefore cannot be picked out and defined as can complex empirical ideas.

As for health, I tried to make it plain in my article that the World Health Organization (WHO) (whatever they claim) are not *defining* health. What they say is not an account of how the word is used, or what it refers to, or an analysis of it. What it is is the statement of a *recommended policy*. The WHO were telling us to pay attention to the mental and social as well as the physical. Now of course one can argue about the WHO policy and other public policies, but these arguments have nothing to do with definitions.

Consider two examples. It is possible to argue until the cows come