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## GLOBAL HEALTH CARE, LOCAL HEALING

**French anthropologist and ethno-pharmacologist Laurent Pordié, who won a Rolex Award in 2000 for his project to preserve traditional medicine in Ladakh, is playing a leading role in international research – and awareness-raising – of the complex interaction between health-care development and traditional healing systems.**

Health care is a primary concern for all societies. In recent decades the biological medical system developed in western societies has come into more frequent contact with the health systems of traditional societies, particularly as what is loosely called “development” is exported by western governments and organisations to non-western societies. Laurent Pordié, equipped

with a strong knowledge of anthropology and pharmacology, as well as several years’ experience of Asian healing systems and international health care, is uniquely placed to study the relationship between health-care development and traditional medicine.

Pordié, who spends much of his time in Ladakh where he has played a key role in the establishment of a school to train Amchi practitioners, is also a highly productive researcher and author. In 2003, the French Institute of Pondicherry, India, where he works as head of the Department of Social Sciences, published his study of links between religion and medicine, “The expression of religion in Tibetan Medicine”.

In March 2005, a book edited by Laurent Pordié, “Panser le monde, penser les médecines”

(Dressing the world’s wounds, addressing medical issues), was released by Paris-based publisher Karthala. The book is the first in a series, with Pordié as the general editor, on the theme of health care around the world. The series will provide material and analytical methods, drawn largely from the social sciences, to allow deeper understanding of a wide range of health-care systems, from traditional midwifery to alternative medicine.

“Panser le monde” investigates health-care development and its effects in many countries and from many different specialist angles.

The book constitutes an urgent plea for the organisations participating in health-care development to recognise and understand social issues before implementing projects and to foresee changes caused by the introduction of the

projects themselves. For this enlightening journey through the practice of health care in India, Mali, Cambodia, Europe and beyond, Pordié calls on sociologists, anthropologists and ethnologists, the authors of the book's 14 chapters (13 of them in French, one in English) to share their insights and experiences.

In his introduction to the 330-page book, Pordié points out that the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are key implementers of development, is determined by temporal and financial factors, and all too often they pay no attention to the "social considerations" that should be an integral part of every health-care development project. The harmonious and fruitful marriage of international development and local health care, including traditional healing, requires a number of vital steps to be carried out systematically. These include understanding the social and cultural environment of a health-care system, acting in harmony with the political and economic structure of the villages and examining the overall impact.

Basic concepts like "pathology" and "normality" differ considerably between cultures. In many societies traditional medicine is closely tied to social and hierarchical relationships within communities. In order to be effective, any health-care practice has to be understood and fully integrated with the local culture. Pordié has

spent several years studying the complex relationship between health and social and religious culture in Ladakh.

However, for some people, like the Paraiyars, members of the "untouchable" caste in southern India, most health matters are decided on therapeutic efficacy rather than on cultural issues, as Robert Deliège, a highly respected specialist in Indian studies today, notes in an essay in the book. "These populations, typically categorised as among the most traditional, turn to biomedicine ["Western" medicine] more often

than not," Deliège explains. In the book Pordié also examines the rights of indigenous communities regarding their knowledge.

The final chapter of his book deals with alternative medicine in Europe, such as Dr Bach's flower remedies, and its evolution from an "inferior" source of knowledge discipline to a legitimate field that complements conventional medicine.

For more information, visit websites [nomadrsi.org](http://nomadrsi.org) and [karthala.com](http://karthala.com)



Amchi practitioner Esche Komozon, in Ladakh, prepares natural remedies.