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The History of Health and Well-Being

When we talk about *health* today, we think of hospitals, doctors, and scientific research.

But for most of human history, health was understood very differently; as a matter of *spiritual balance, divine will, or even moral purity*.

Let's take a closer look at how this concept evolved across civilizations.

Ancient Civilizations – The Birth of Healing Traditions

- The earliest medical practices were deeply connected with religion and nature.
- In Ancient Egypt, healers used herbs, honey, and minerals, but also relied on magic and prayers to gods like Isis and Thoth.
The *Ebers Papyrus* (around 1550 BCE) listed hundreds of medical remedies; it's one of the oldest known medical texts.
- In Mesopotamia, diseases were believed to be punishments from the gods. Priests acted as both doctors and spiritual healers.
- In China, the idea of balance dominated: *yin* and *yang*, *qi* (life energy), and the harmony between humans and nature.
The *Huangdi Neijing* (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine) shaped traditional Chinese medicine for over 2,000 years.
- In India, the Ayurveda system viewed health as the balance of body, mind, and spirit; an approach that still influences modern wellness movements.

Greece and Rome – From Myth to Rational Medicine

- The **Greeks** made a revolutionary shift from myth to reason.
- **Hippocrates** (5th century BCE), often called *the Father of Medicine*, taught that diseases have **natural causes** and can be studied scientifically. His ethical oath “*First, do no harm*” still guides doctors today.
- **Galen**, a later Roman physician, expanded Hippocrates’ ideas and created a system based on the **four humors**: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile.
For centuries, this theory dominated medical thought in Europe and the Middle East.
- However, medicine at that time still depended heavily on observation rather than experimentation and **translation** played a major role in spreading those ideas.
Greek and Roman medical texts were later translated into **Arabic, Syriac, and Latin**, ensuring their survival.

The Islamic Golden Age – The Bridge of Knowledge

- Between the 8th and 13th centuries, the Islamic world became the global center of medical knowledge.
- Physicians like Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Al-Razi (Rhazes) established hospitals, wrote encyclopedias, and insisted on *empirical observation*.
- Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine (al-Qanun fi'l-Tibb)* was translated into Latin in the 12th century and used in European universities until the 17th century.
- **Translation was central:** Greek medical works were preserved and expanded upon by Arab scholars, who in turn passed them to Europe. This era shows how translation literally saved scientific heritage.

The Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution – Anatomy and Discovery

- During the Renaissance, the human body became a legitimate subject of study.
Artists and scientists collaborated: Leonardo da Vinci dissected corpses to draw accurate anatomical sketches.
- Andreas Vesalius published *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), correcting centuries of Galen's anatomical errors.
- Later, William Harvey discovered how blood circulates through the body (1628), marking the birth of modern physiology.
- This period also introduced Latin medical terminology many of the words we use today (*circulatory, pulmonary, nervous system*) come from these early translations.

The Industrial Age – From Individual Health to Public Health

- With industrialization came new problems: urban crowding, pollution, epidemics.
In the 19th century, the focus shifted from individual care to public health.
- Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine (1796), saving millions of lives.
- John Snow identified contaminated water as the cause of cholera in London (1854), founding modern epidemiology.
- Florence Nightingale, during the Crimean War, revolutionized nursing and sanitation.
Governments began to see health as a **collective responsibility**; a crucial step toward the concept of *universal healthcare* in SDG 3.

The Modern Era – Global Health and Human Rights

- The 20th century brought dramatic medical advances: antibiotics, insulin, x-rays, vaccines, and organ transplants. But it also revealed inequalities — many people still lacked access to basic care.
- After World War II, the founding of the **World Health Organization (WHO)** in 1948 declared:

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

- This was a turning point: the word **well-being** entered international language and policy; a key concept for translators today.
- Later, campaigns against **HIV/AIDS**, **malaria**, and **COVID-19** showed that global health depends on **communication, trust, and accurate translation**. Misinformation can spread faster than any virus; that’s why linguistic clarity and cultural sensitivity are vital.

The Evolution of Quality Education

Education is often seen as a simple process of teaching and learning but historically, it has always been a mirror of how societies understood *knowledge*, *power*, and *human potential*.

Let's explore how the idea of **quality education** evolved through different civilizations and eras.

Ancient Beginnings – Learning as a Privilege

- The story of education begins long before the word *school* existed.
- In Ancient Mesopotamia, around 2500 BCE, education was reserved for scribes who learned to write cuneiform on clay tablets.
Schools were called “*edubba*” — literally “*tablet house*.”
Learning to read and write was a form **of social privilege, not a right.**
- In Ancient Egypt, education served religion and the state.
Students trained to become priests, architects, and administrators; **literacy was the path to power.**
- In China, the Confucian system placed education at the heart of moral and social order.
The imperial examination system, beginning in the Han dynasty (around 200 BCE), was one of the first attempts at merit-based education.
It established the idea that anyone could rise through learning — a revolutionary concept for its time.
- In India, education took place in *gurukulas*; informal forest schools where knowledge was passed orally.
The focus was spiritual, philosophical, and practical, emphasizing harmony between knowledge and life.
- At this stage, education was about **transmitting tradition, not questioning it.**
Curiosity and critical thinking came later.

Greece and Rome – The Birth of Liberal Education

- In Ancient Greece, education became a civic ideal.
- The concept of *paideia* meant cultivating the whole *person*; body, mind, and soul to create good citizens.
- Socrates taught through questioning, introducing the idea of **critical thinking**.
- Plato's Academy (founded around 387 BCE) and Aristotle's Lyceum (philosophy school) became the first philosophical schools of Europe.
- The Romans adopted Greek ideas but added practicality. They developed the liberal arts; grammar, rhetoric, and logic; forming the foundation of what we now call a **humanistic education**.
- The word “*school*” itself comes from the Greek *scholē*, meaning *leisure* because learning was originally something only those with free time could afford.

The Middle Ages – Education and the Church

- During the Middle Ages, learning in Europe was largely controlled by the Catholic Church. Monasteries became centers of literacy, preserving ancient texts by copying them in Latin.
- Around the 12th century, something new appeared; **The University**.
- The University of Bologna (1088) focused on law,
- Paris (1150) on theology,
- Oxford and Cambridge (11th–13th centuries) on philosophy and the liberal arts.
- Universities were international spaces; students and teachers from all over Europe spoke **Latin**, so **translation** was literally the *language of learning*. Knowledge from Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew sources entered Europe through translators in **Toledo, Sicily, and Baghdad**.
Without this multilingual exchange, European science and philosophy would not have developed.
- Education in this period was hierarchical and male-dominated, but it established two lasting ideas:
 1. Learning requires an **institutional structure**.
 2. Knowledge should be **shared across borders; the foundation of global education today**.

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment – Education as Human Development

- The Renaissance revived curiosity about the world and the human being. Scholars like **Erasmus of Rotterdam** emphasized that education should cultivate moral virtue, empathy, and independent thought. Printing technology (Gutenberg, 1450s) democratized knowledge; books became cheaper and learning more accessible.
- In the **Enlightenment** (17th–18th centuries), thinkers such as **John Locke**, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, and **Immanuel Kant** redefined education as a path to *freedom*.
- Locke described the mind as a “*tabula rasa*” — a blank slate shaped by experience.
- Rousseau, in *Émile* (1762), argued that education should follow the child’s natural development rather than strict discipline.
- Kant saw education as the process by which humanity “leaves behind immaturity.”
- These ideas laid the groundwork for **modern pedagogy** and for the belief that **every person deserves the chance to learn.**

The 19th and 20th Centuries – From Privilege to Right

- By the 19th century, education had become a political issue.
- The Industrial Revolution required literate workers and technical training.
- Many nations introduced **public schooling**; Prussia led the way with compulsory education laws (1763), later adopted in France, Britain, and the U.S.
- Reformers like Horace Mann in America and Maria Montessori in Italy promoted universal, child-centered education.
- In the 20th century, education for all became a global slogan.
- The **UNESCO Constitution (1945)** declared that *“wars begin in the minds of men, and it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”* Education was no longer just about knowledge; it was about peace, equality, and democracy.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) confirmed education as a basic human right.

The Digital and Global Age – Redefining Quality

- In the 21st century, we face new questions:
Who defines “quality”? How do we ensure inclusivity in the digital era?
- Online learning, artificial intelligence, and open access platforms have expanded opportunities but also revealed **digital divides** between countries and communities.
- SDG 4 therefore emphasizes not only access but also equity and lifelong learning:
✓ “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

This means:

- ✓ Education should adapt to diverse needs, languages, and contexts.
- ✓ Translation again becomes essential; to make educational materials accessible across the world.

Reflection: Translators as Educators

- From the *edubba* of Mesopotamia to today's digital classrooms, education has always depended on language.
Every time knowledge crossed a border; from Greek to Arabic, from Latin to English, from textbook to screen; it required translation.
- Translators, then, are not just mediators of words.
They are teachers between cultures, helping ideas survive, evolve, and reach new generations.
- So when we talk about *Quality Education*, we are also talking about the quality of translation because every learner deserves not only access to education, but *understanding*.

56. In deciding upon these Goals and targets, we recognise that each country faces specific challenges to achieve sustainable development, and we underscore the special challenges facing the most vulnerable countries and, in particular, African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, as well as the specific challenges facing the middle-income countries. Countries in situations of conflict also need special attention.