

**Narrative Explanatory Models and Accountability for Illness in Sanskrit  
Medical Literature**  
Anthony Cerulli

In Sanskrit medical literature the ways in which and the reasons why people become sick are sometimes explained with narratives. These narratives make up a unique type of “explanatory model” in the classical Indian medical system of Ayurveda, for they not only offer reasons for the occurrence of sickness and suggest possible treatments, as the standard explanatory models of sickness do, they also give meaning to the personal and social experience of being ill. In so doing, the so-called patient receives special attention in the course of the medical narrative. These narratives tend not to be as much about the inner-workings of patients’ bodies as much as they are about the lives of patients, the decisions they make and the actions they undertake, so that ubiquitous social dimensions of human life become vital to what it means to be a patient—or, more precisely, as the Sanskrit term suggests, “a diseased one” (*rogin*, *atura*, *vyadhita*). Notions of health and illness consequently move beyond the realms of anatomy and physiology and into the domains of ethics, religion, and cosmology. For the compilers of the Sanskrit medical sources, the narrative explanatory model appears to have been a device, in the spirit of Susan Sontag’s famous phrase, to portray health and illness as metaphors for religious expectations and cultural anxieties about mortality. In this paper, I begin with a discussion of some of the ways in which medical narratives operate as explanatory models in Sanskrit medical literature. I then look at a case study from the *Caraka Samhita*, exploring in particular the question of patient accountability for illness in Sanskrit medical narratives due to social and religious activity.