

I need help. I've just crossed Thorong La, the world's highest trekking pass, with a hacking cough, severe gastroenteritis and a sharp pain in my side that makes walking for hours each day something between unpleasant and excruciating. I can feel things moving in my ribcage that don't usually move, and I'm losing weight rapidly. Added to all this, I ran out of paracetamol a week ago and codeine the day before yesterday.

We are still two days' walk from the nearest airport at Jomsom, and two weeks from Kathmandu.

The spectre of more trekking has left me desperate for some kind of medical attention, even if it's just a "You'll be right" from a local quack.

When I arrive in the medieval town of Jarkhot, I discover the "doctor" locals have been telling me about is a "Tibetan doctor". I'm not really sure what that means, but I'm quite beyond caring.

I stifle my sceptical thoughts and (slowly) climb the several hundred stairs to Jarkhot's monastery. A knock on a door is answered by a soft voice, and a curtain is held aside for me to enter.

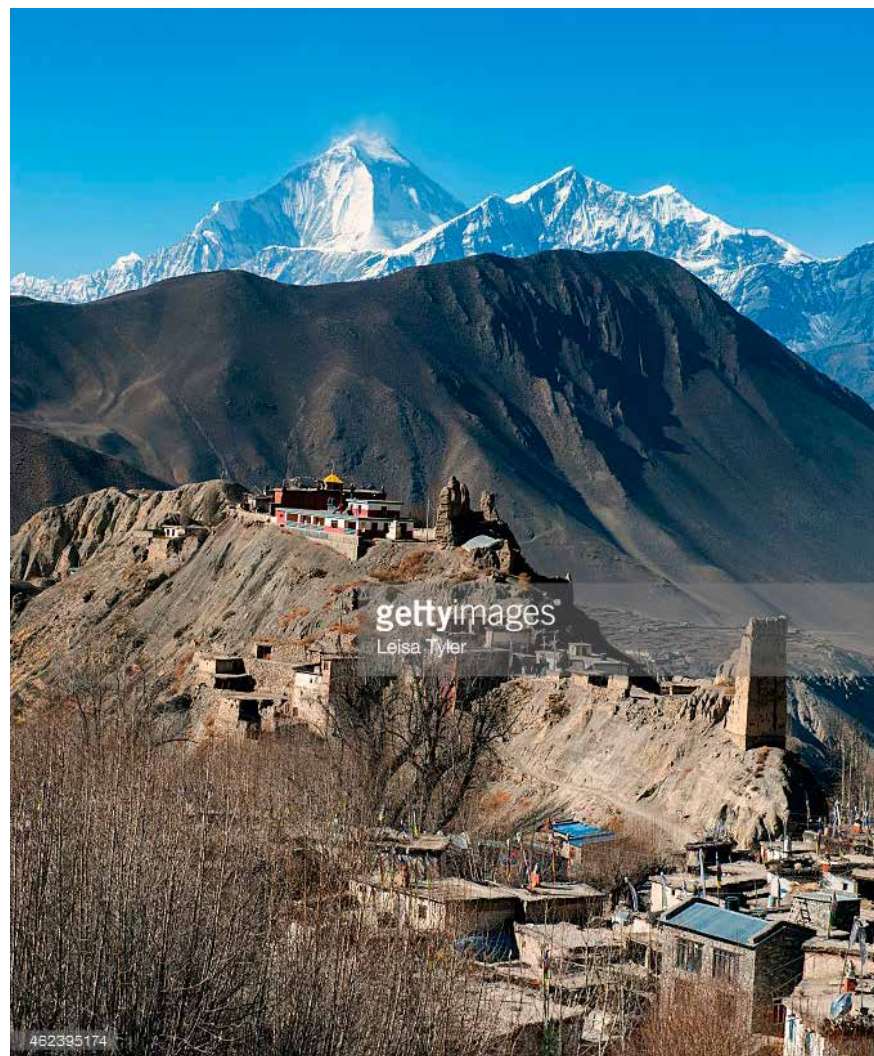
The room is small and dim, with an entire wall covered in shelves stacked with glass jars. In the jars I see brown powders, muddy liquids, black pellets, eyeballs – OK, not the latter, but no sign of medicine as the term applies in my mind. Scepticism returns.

I am greeted by a nice young fellow in flowing maroon robes. His English is excellent. He asks me to roll up my sleeves and lie my hands on the desk between us, palms up.

He takes my wrist in his hand and applies three fingers to the ulnar artery. Varying the pressure between the fingers, he asks a few questions about my symptoms.

I give him the details of the flu-like symptoms that had me bedridden in Kathmandu, and the vomiting and diarrhoea that come and go (the particulars of which I shall spare you).

He does his pressing routine for a while, then takes my other wrist. We sit quietly. Minutes go by. He takes both hands at once, then alternates pressure between one wrist and the other, always concentrating on the same area, just below the hand. Just as I'm about to commence eye-rolling, he speaks.



A monastery above the isolated village of Jarkhot.

The balls are placed in three little cellophane packets with a piece of paper showing the dosage. I'm to take them three times a day. The afternoon balls are supplemented by a tiny black seed of unknown origin – one per day. Morning and evening balls are dosed in threes.

I take my packets and he nominates a fee of about \$10, which I pay, and then double in the monastery's donations box.

I am a woman of science. I go running because science says it's good for me,

**HE DESCRIBES MY SYMPTOMS IN BEWILDERING DETAIL, NOTING A DOZEN THINGS HE COULDN'T HAVE GUESSED.**

I take paracetamol because science says it will make my headache go away, and I try to avoid eating a whole pack of Tim Tams on movie night because science says that will give me cankles.

But I've got nothing to lose by trying his concoctions. I couldn't feel any worse. I down three balls with a glass of water before we depart Jarkhot.

By breakfast, the cough is all but gone and I've spent the night sleeping instead of on the toilet. I have quite an appetite at breakfast, and as I take an accidental selfie I notice that my face even looks a little less skeletal than a few days ago.

Weeks later, back home in Australia, climbing into the car or lifting the shopping still causes an occasional jab of pain from the rib. Science has borne out the Tibetan doctor's diagnosis: it was definitely an infection of the digestive tract, and my rib is indeed broken.

I spare a thought for the mysterious little balls and wonder what was in them. Customs declined to allow them into the country, so my grand plans to have them assayed were shot.

What really baffles me is the doctor's diagnostic technique: part acupressure, part telepathy, totally effective. However he divined my ailments, the proof is in the results. And as a woman of science, that's all the proof I need. •

To see an interactive exploration of Denby Weller's adventures on the Annapurna Circuit, visit [smh.com.au/interactive/2016/annapurna](http://smh.com.au/interactive/2016/annapurna)

# EYE OF NEWT

**In Nepal's remote Annapurna Circuit, a physically shattered Denby Weller sidelines her scepticism and visits a traditional Tibetan doctor to cure her ills.**

For several minutes, he describes my symptoms in bewildering detail, noting about a dozen things that he couldn't possibly have guessed.

He tells me how I'm sleeping, how the cough changes throughout the day, where the pain is, how long it lasts. He tells me I forgot to mention the headache (I did), and that the pain in my side is probably a broken rib – but whatever it is, it's healing now.

"You began with an infection of the large intestine, the colon," he says squarely. "It has spread to secondary infections of the respiratory system and

probably the blood. I will treat them all. You will have 10 days of medicine, and when you return to the West, you should see a Western doctor for X-rays and to confirm my diagnosis. You will be well by then."

While I silently try to digest all of this, he prepares a remedy.

This consists of a series of small spheres that bear a striking resemblance and taste to donkey poo (although I'm not planning to verify this). The spheres are comprised of powders from many different jars and some unidentified goop which he hand-rolls into pill-sized balls.

MELBOURNE

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