

Ross-based freelance journalist, Judith Stares, gave Kyrle Probus Club members much food for thought at their meeting on Thursday 5 July, with a stimulating talk titled “Does Illness Have Meaning?”



After a career which included time as a foreign correspondent in various world trouble-spots, from the Falklands War to Tiananmen Square, Judith began to specialize in health and medicine, investigating illness and treatments in other cultures, including China, Russia and the USA.

“Health is a topic which concerns us all,” she pointed out. “Advancements in biomedicine, computer science and robotics are changing the way we think about the nature of what it is to be healthy. Many conditions that were once thought to be debilitating, or even fatal, have turned out not to be so.”

Judith asked: “Do these changes mean that we must now revise how we understand the nature of health?”

Her talk gave examples of illness or disease in our own and other cultures, raising particular questions concerning the mind-body relationship. “Should the mind and body ever be regarded as separate entities?”, Judith asked. “Psychological difficulties can have a direct effect on how our immune system responds to threats. Hearing bad news, for example has been shown in some cases to herald heart problems or exacerbate autoimmune disorders. It

means that the words we hear can affect us deeply, in the very tissue of our bodies. Words are a big responsibility, and we ignore them at our peril.”

Judith went on to describe how symptoms and the language used to describe them vary dramatically between cultures, and concluded with words of wisdom from Hippocrates: “It is more important to know what sort of person has the disease than what sort of disease the person has.”