This exploratory, cross-sectional study examined the effect of self-reported cultural background on beliefs about medicines (modern pharmaceuticals) and perceptions of personal sensitivity to the adverse effects of taking medication. Using a validated questionnaire, beliefs about pharmaceutical medication were compared between 500 UK undergraduate students who identified themselves as having an Asian or European cultural background. There was a significant association between cultural background and beliefs about the benefits and dangers of medicines. Students who self-reported to have an Asian cultural background expressed more negative views about medication than those who reported a European cultural background. Students with an Asian cultural background were significantly more likely to perceive medicines as being intrinsically harmful, addictive substances that should be avoided. They were significantly less likely to endorse the benefits of modern medication. There was no significant relationship between cultural background and perceptions of personal sensitivity to medication effects or belief about how doctors use medication. In the total sample, past and present experience of taking medication was associated with a more positive orientation to medicines in general. Students who considered themselves to have a European cultural background had significantly more experience with prescribed medication than those who selected an Asian cultural background. The relationship between cultural background and beliefs about medicines in general was maintained after controlling for potential confounding variables, including chosen degree course, experience of taking prescribed medication, age, and gender. The identification of differences in beliefs about medication, between two specific cultural groups, suggests the need for a greater understanding of the effects of cultural background on medicine-usage with potential implications for the conduct of prescribing-related consultations and for the provision of patient information on medication.

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Introduction

‘Ethnicity and ethnic grouping rest on the cultural differentiation of individuals and on the creation of social bonds between those who share a common culture’ (Rex, 1993). Culture is the collective noun for the conventional patterns of thought and behaviour, including value beliefs and rules of conduct, which distinguish a particular social group and that are learned rather than inherited (Tattersall, 1995) and which are transmitted through the most fundamental dimensions of culture: food, language and kinship relations (Jovichelovitch & Gervais, 1999). Ethnic or cultural differences may have a powerful influence on many