

# Cultural Diversity and Sensitivity

The United States is often thought of as the great melting pot where anyone from any background can assimilate into a single society. This idealistic way of thinking is not applicable to our nation today. A more realistic and appropriate “ideal” is one of multiculturalism (cultural diversity). Multiculturalism is based on the idea that culture identities should not be discarded or ignored, but instead, should be maintained and valued.

Cultural diversity matters to every single one of us, both professionally and personally. For our organization to not only survive, but to thrive, each of us needs to be aware and sensitive to ALL members of the community. When all segments are respected and utilized, everyone involved benefits.

America is the most diverse nation in the world. You must create a balance of respect and understanding in the work place to have happy and optimally productive workers. In addition to this, it is essential that you and your co-workers are aware of the importance of respecting diversity when dealing with our patients. This means that we all need to learn to accept what is different from us and respect it.

## **Why do we need to know about other cultures?**

American hospitals are increasingly serving an ethnically diverse patient population. In order to provide optimal care, it is essential to understand that not all cultures share the same beliefs regarding health and illness, nor do they agree on what is appropriate treatment for diseases, or what is proper behavior when ill. These differences can at best, cause a great deal of frustration on the part of the provider, and, at worst, result in inferior care.

## **Values in conflict:**

Oftentimes American cultural values come in direct conflict with those of other cultures. For example:

- American culture values independence; self-care is therefore highly stressed. In contrast, many other cultures value family interdependence and prefer to have family members care for each other.
- American culture values privacy and autonomy. It is believed that patients should make their own decisions regarding their healthcare. In many other cultures, if a negative prognosis is involved, the family will want the patient to be shielded from the news.
- American culture values men and women as equals. In contrast, in many traditional Asian cultures, males are dominant. Providers should try not to be disturbed by such signs of male dominance, nor make the mistake of interpreting a husband answering questions put to his wife as a sign of abuse.

# Amish

(Persons belonging to any Amish community)

## **General Information:**

- Work is highly valued.
- Most Amish children attend Amish schools, though in few rural areas some attend public schools.
- Amish children attend school until the eighth grade.
- There is little to no emphasis placed upon higher education in the Amish community.
- Make own clothes; fabric is typically solid in color.
- Married men are expected to grow a beard.
- White caps on the women signify marriage.

## **Health Beliefs:**

- Do not obtain insurance or utilize public support or assistance.
- Babies are born in both hospitals and at home with doctors and midwives attending.
- Immunizations for children are becoming a more common practice.
- Tend to seek care outside of healthcare providers.

## **Social Relationships:**

- The family is the most important aspect of the Amish life.
- Children are the most valued and nurtured and most families have ten or more children according to God's teachings.
- The male is considered the head of the household and main provider but a husband and wife make decisions together.
- Gathering around the family table is one of the most important routines in the home.
- At sixteen for boys and younger for girls, there is a period called "rumspringa" (running around), a time when young adults consider the faith and make decisions as to what their life path will be.
- Adults are rebaptized into the Church if they choose the Amish faith.
- Once adult commitment to the Church is made, one will be excommunicated if he/she leaves the Church.

## **Healthcare Information:**

- Amish prefer natural/holistic care and may not seek the offered healthcare of the area.
- Often do not use preventative healthcare services, so healthcare providers often see Amish people with advanced healthcare issues.
- Some health issues aren't identified or understood due to limited educational resources.
- Genetic disorders or healthcare issues are often seen as "Gotten Wille" (God's Will).

# Hispanic Americans

(Persons of Latin American descent including Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Central and South Americans living in the United States)

## Health Beliefs:

- Individuals who become sick usually consult with their family members first.
- Hispanics are a “present” oriented society and may neglect preventive health care.
- Most Latin Americans see thinness as a problem and plumpness as the ideal, so advice geared towards weight loss may not be followed because it creates a negative body image.
- Hispanics are far more emotionally expressive and expect to be pampered when ill which is one way the family shows love and concern.
- Most Hispanics are Catholics and birth control methods other than rhythm are unacceptable.

## Social Relationships:

- The male is the head of the family and makes all major decisions.
- The female is the maternal powerhouse of the home.
- Elders have a prestigious status in the family.
- A Hispanic patient may show up late, or not at all, for appointments.
- Modesty is valued in Hispanic culture and it’s not reserved just for the women.
- The area between the waist and the knees are considered to be particularly private.
- Hispanics look down on people who are mentally ill.

## Expressions of Pain:

- Males tend to have a stoic approach when dealing with pain and the females tends to be more expressive.

## Birth and Children:

- Attending a woman’s delivery is a woman’s job and ideally it is reserved for the woman’s mother and the midwife.
- Culture dictates that the husband should not see his wife or child until the delivery is complete and both have been cleaned and dressed.
- In general, Hispanic women prefer that their mothers attend them in labor.
- Older children of the family are expected to help raise the younger ones.

## Death:

- Family gathers and usually hosts supper for all of the guests.
- Will chose to bury the loved one instead of cremating.

## Diet:

- Heavy reliance on grains and beans and the incorporation of fresh fruits and vegetables.

# **Arab Muslim Americans**

**(Native language is Arabic and of Muslim religion. May come from countries such as Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, etc)**

## **Health Beliefs:**

- Belief that health is influenced by Allah's (God) will.
- Food deprivation is a precursor to illness—may need to stress importance of NPO
- During female menstruation women are considered “unclean” and are forbidden to pray.
- The sick and elderly will be cared for regardless of care demands.
- Prolonging life by life support means is unacceptable unless there is evidence that the person will be able to live a life of reasonable quality.
- Accepts blood and blood products as treatments.
- Organ donations generally acceptable with very careful explanation.

## **Social Relationships:**

- Males are authority figures and make all important family decisions.
- Status and authority is gained with aging.
- Extreme modesty and sexual segregation are required. Family honor is tied to female purity. Female patients will not be in the presence of a strange male without being fully dressed or covered. It is very important to try and staff same sex hospital employees (physician, nursing, lab housekeeping, etc) when planning care of the patient.
- Direct eye contact between male and female may be interpreted as an invitation of a sexual nature instead of directness.
- Prayer is practiced five times daily. A preparatory washing is performed before prayer.

## **Expressions of Pain:**

- Expressive

## **Birth/Children:**

- May be expressive during labor.
- Husbands may refuse to participate in labor and delivery because the blood of labor renders the women unclean.
- Women may avoid showering for several days after birth of child.
- May use belly bands on newborn.

# Indian Hindu Americans

## Health Beliefs:

- Belief that the body must be in balance to function normally and be free from disease/illness.
- There are three principals of balance: Vata controls movement; Pitta controls metabolism and heat (incorporates hot/cold; food/environment principals); Kapha controls body structure and solidity.
- Adding cold water to hot water is unacceptable (adding hot water to cold water is acceptable). Keep this in mind when preparing a patient's sponge bath—if your water temperature is too hot when starting, do not add cold to cool it down—it is better to discard the water and start over as to not offend the patient.
- Prayer for recovery from illness is generally unacceptable.
- May mediate frequently so to be sure to provide a quiet environment.
- Modesty and personal hygiene are highly valued.
- The right hand is believed to be clean and is used for handling items such as religious books and eating utensils. The left hand is believed to be dirty and is used for handling the genitals and other items considered dirty.
- Blood products are generally approved for treatment.

## Social Relationships:

- The caste system has been legally abolished in India but is believed to still exist in family life and behaviors.
- Father is primary decision maker of family—the wife will not answer questions if her husband is in the room.
- Men are considered superior to women.
- Male children receive preferential treatment—especially firstborn son.
- Family is highly valued—members will want to stay with the patient and participate in care.
- Courtesy and self-control is highly valued.
- Direct eye contact is acceptable from man to man—initiation of direct eye contact from male to female other than female's husband is unacceptable.
- Taboo for a man, other than the woman's husband to extend his hand toward the woman for introductions. During introductions of male to female patients the greeting should be addressed to the husband or eldest female companion first.

## Expressions of Pain:

- Stoic.

# Asian Americans

(Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese)

## **Health Beliefs:**

- Belief is based on balance of hot/cold, yin/yang principals.
- The head is considered private and personal, being the seat of the soul of life—obtain permission to touch.
- Self-care and independence from family is NOT valued, which may impede the accomplishment of self-care goals.
- May refuse to have blood drawn or blood transfusions—belief that losing blood depletes the body's strength and also provides a route for soul to leave the body (blood draws) or spirits to enter the body (blood transfusions).
- Mental illness carries a stigma—may be difficult to impossible to convince one to take psychotherapy.

## **Social Relationships:**

- Males are authority figures and make all important family decisions.
- Firstborn male may receive preferential treatment.
- Modesty highly valued—the area between the waist and knees is considered private—be sure to explain procedures very thoroughly before beginning.
- Extended family is very common—sons continue to live with parents until death.
- Family members will want to stay continuously when a hospitalization occurs, providing all personal care.
- May avoid direct eye contact with nurses and physicians—it is considered impolite or aggressive.
- Very quiet and reserved—pay particularly close attention to nonverbal communication.
- Respect for elders authority highly valued.
- Side-by-side or angle seating arrangements may be more comfortable for the patient since face-to-face arrangements may make them uncomfortable.
- High value is placed on respect and courtesy.
- Birthdays are not celebrated—considered a year older at the beginning of each New Year. Upon arrival to the U.S., if they were unable to give a month and date the U.S. government assigned January 1<sup>st</sup> as their birthday.

## **Expressions of Pain:**

- Stoic. May not request or may refuse pain medications.

## **Birth and Children:**

- Belief pain must be experienced as part of childbirth—to express pain is believed to bring shame to women—pay attention to nonverbal.
- High sodium intake in diet thought to be good during

# Native Americans

(The largest population of Native Americans in the Central Michigan area is the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe)

## **Health Beliefs:**

- Folk healers or medicine men still exist amongst many tribes and visits should be allowed (burning of sage is very important)
- May believe that nay illness is a price paid because of something that has or will happen.
- Total harmony with nature—the body must be treated with respect just as the earth must be treated with respect.

## **Social Relationships:**

- Direct eye contact with nurse and physician is sometimes considered impolite or aggressive.
- Assertiveness may be offensive.
- Silence is considered essential to understand re respect another person. A pause by a Native American when questioned indicates that careful consideration is being given. Health care workers need to avoid the appearance of being hurried or impatient.
- Honesty in keeping one's word is highly valued.
- Vigorous handshaking may be considered aggressive.

## **Expressions of Pain:**

- Stoic

## **Birth and Children:**

- Burning of incense is very popular during delivery, especially sage (practices amongst tribes may differ).
- Children are highly valued.
- May be considered taboo to cut a child's hair—be sure to inform the parents and get consent.

## **Death:**

- Do not believe that autopsies will help explain the cause of death.
- Rituals may be performed—but will vary amongst different tribes.

## **Diet:**

- Popular foods are beans and corn.
- Frequently lactose intolerant.

## **References**

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Simon and Schuster Adult Publishing Group (June 1995); Websters New World Dictionary.

## **Internet Sites**

The Value of Cultural Diversity – <http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/starting/diversity.html>

Patient Diversity: Beyond the Vital Signs (2001) CRM Films – <http://www.crmlearning.com>

Different Like You: Appreciating Diversity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2001), Edge Training System, Inc – <http://www.edtetraining.com>

The Dangers of Stereotyping by Joyce Millet – <http://www.culturalsavvy.com>

Hispanic Culture – <http://www.literacynet.org/lp/hperspectives/hispculture.html>

Transcultural Nursing: The Hispanic American Community – <http://www.culturediversity.org/hisp.html>