



Communicating with Your Chinese Patient

Perception of Illness • Patterns of Kinship and Decision Making • Comfort with Touch

Culture Clues™ is designed to increase awareness about concepts and preferences of patients from the diverse cultures served by University of Washington Medical Center. **Every person is unique; always consider the individual's beliefs, needs, and concerns.** Use Culture Clues™ and information from the patient and family to guide your communication and your patient care.

How does the Chinese culture deal with illness?

Helping Your Patient Feel Comfortable with UWMC

- Remember to find out if this is your patient's first visit to University of Washington Medical Center.
 - **Keep in mind that patients who are new to the system may not be aware of the role of the Primary Care Team or the process for getting a referral to a specialist.**

Explaining the Cause of Illness and Disease

- Your patient may have specific cultural beliefs, for example they may view illness and death as a natural part of life.
- Health may be viewed as finding harmony between complementary energies such as cold and hot, dark and light. These forces are called *yin* and *yang*. Most Chinese actually are very comfortable with duality between western and traditional Chinese health beliefs.

Building Bridges Between Traditional Remedies and Western Health Care

- Your patient may use foods and herbs to restore *yin/yang* balance. In addition to special foods, your patient may use other traditional Chinese remedies as an initial approach for healing, especially during the early stages of illness. Some traditional Chinese therapies, including massage, acupuncture, and moxibuxtion are commonly used as an adjunct to western medicine.
- Your patient may prefer to drink only hot liquids (water or tea) when sick or postpartum.
- Patients may try traditional approaches first, and will seek western medical care if these treatments fail. Patients may occasionally delay seeking care out of concern for communication barriers, costs, etc. As a result, patients may present at the medical center acutely ill.
 - **Ask your patient, "What do you call your problem? When did it start? What do you think caused the problem? Have you taken any medicines or herbs? What results have you had from the medicines or herbs? Do you believe the illness is serious? How can I help you?"**
 - **Build bridges between traditional medicine and western care: when considering traditional practices, determine when the remedies are beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Incorporate beneficial and neutral remedies into the plan of care, such as dietary advice. Consider potential drug interactions.**

Helping Your Patient Understand Medicines

- Your patient may believe that western medicine is too strong and may not take the full dose or complete the course of treatment. Your patient may cut the dose in half or stop taking the medicine whether he/she feels better or not.
 - **Explain that the dose is customized for your patient's height, weight and metabolic needs. Describe the need to take the full dose whether your patient feels better right away or not. Talk about side effects. Share your plan in dealing with side effects. Ask open-ended questions to ensure understanding.**
 - **Alert:** Be aware that your patient may have enzyme deficiencies that may require a change in medication or dosage. Contact the pharmacy if the patient does not appear to be responding to medications or if he/she appears to be especially sensitive to medications' effects.

How are medical decisions made in the Chinese culture?

Understanding Relationships

- The Chinese culture emphasizes loyalty to family and devotion to traditions and puts less emphasis on individual feelings. Assess your patient's kinship relationships and determine which family members are most influential in decision making. When possible, engage the whole family in discussions that involve decisions and education about care.
 - **Be aware of the importance of family members serving in caregiver roles and consider extending visiting hours. Explain the visitation policy before admission or surgery so that the family knows what to expect.**

- Bad medical news is often shielded from the patient by the family in the belief that telling the patient will only make the patient's condition worse.
 - **Ask your patient whom they want included in medical decisions. If patients do not want to make medical decisions for themselves, let them know they need to prepare a Durable Power of Attorney for health care.**

Customs that Influence Decision Making

- In addition to religious beliefs, there are many cultural and traditional beliefs that your patient may subscribe to that will influence decisions about health care treatment. For example, your patient may seem hesitant to make a decision about surgery because of preference to retain full complement of body parts (eg., uterus, gall bladder, etc.).
- Whenever possible, allow time for the patient to gain perspective and make decisions. Schedule a follow-up appointment or set up a scheduled phone call to allow for needed time. Offer time limits that are acceptable to patient and medical necessity. Patients tend to rely heavily on doctor's advice, so they may have trouble deciding between different options.

Understanding Communication About Health Care and Treatments

- Your patient may nod, smile, and/or say "yes" or "ya" to acknowledge he/she heard you, rather than that he/she understands or approves. Your patient may be reluctant to say "no" to a doctor or health care provider because it may be considered disrespectful or cause disharmony.
 - **Ask your patients open-ended questions to verify understanding and encourage them to ask questions.**
 - **Ask them to repeat what they understand in their own words.**

What are the Chinese culture's norms about touch?

Understanding Norms About Eye Contact and Body Language

- Respect is shown to authority figures by giving a gentle bow and avoiding eye contact.
- Nonverbal cues are an important part of communication. For example, smiles when appropriate may be one way to build rapport.
- Your patient may highly value emotional self-control, appearing stoic. Be aware that your patient may not show pain or ask for pain medications.
 - **Instead of asking your patient about pain, ask, "May I get you something for pain?"**
 - **Be respectful of your patient's desire to keep emotions in control when asked about upsetting subject matters.**

Understanding Norms About Modesty

- Consider the modesty of women and girls when giving a pelvic exam. Many young women are modest about having an exam and may prefer a female doctor to do it. In some cases, your patient may refuse a gynecological exam from a provider of either gender.
 - **Before you begin a gynecological exam, it is important to ask your patient, "May I examine you?" Ask your patient if she prefers a female doctor, attendant, or interpreter to remain in the room during the exam.**

What is unique about this patient and family that you will not learn from culture tips or information?

There is a wide range of cultural differences based on age, ethnic group, country of origin, religious beliefs, generation, migration wave, and length of time away from China.

Check Out These Resources to Learn More About Health Care and Chinese Culture

- ✓ *Culture and Nursing Care, A Pocket Guide*, J.G. Lipson, S.L. Sibble, P.A. Minarik, 1997, pp. 280-290*.
- ✓ *Explaining Illness Research, Theory, and Strategies*, Whaley, Bryan B., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, pp. 283-297*. (*Available at UWMC's Learning Resource Center – Room cc420.)
- ✓ **Culture Clues and End-of-Life Care Sheets:** <http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/cultureclues.html>

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