Understanding cultural humility with Hmong patients

Understanding and practicing cultural humility allows patients to receive the best possible care. This month introduces the unique cultural needs of Hmong patients and families with an emphasis on cultural humility.

First it is important to understand the history of the Hmong people. Originally from the mountainous regions of Laos, Vietnam and China, the Hmong have a rich cultural heritage that includes a deep reverence for ancestors, a belief in the power of shamanism and a strong sense of community. Hmong soldiers fought as allies of the United States in the Vietnam War. After facing persecution they fled as refugees. Many settled in Wisconsin in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

When working with Hmong patients, it is important to show respect for their cultural traditions and beliefs. This may include asking about their beliefs regarding illness and healing, birth and death and acknowledging the important role that shamans and spiritual leaders play in their community.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the Hmong language and cultural practices may be unfamiliar to non-Hmong healthcare providers. Take the time to learn about the Hmong language and customs. Consider working with Hmong interpreters and cultural liaisons to ensure that your patients feel understood and respected.

Another important aspect of cultural humility is recognizing and addressing the power dynamics that may exist between providers, patients and the patient's community. Power dynamics are the ways in which people relate and interact with each other with different social queues and end goals. In some cases it may be necessary to consult the family for serious medical issues. A conference may be needed if there is a major problem with the patient.
The conference might include all identified family decision-making members including the clan leader and shaman. It may be more beneficial to have this meeting in a conference room instead of a patient room.

Click on the titles below to access Hmong training and resources.

Additional Training and Resources

Cultural Humility Series: Hmong
This video is part of a series from the Minnesota Center for Prevention. It provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Hmong culture regarding language, faith, food, art, wellness and more with a culturally humble lens.

The Office of Minority Health
US Department of Health and Human Services' mission is to improve and protect the health of racial and ethnic minority populations through the development of health policies and programs to eliminate health disparities. Provided are resources from the Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island Heritage month.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down - Anne Fadiman
This book chronicles the struggles of a Hmong refugee family and their interactions with the health care system. The book tells the story of Lia Lee, an infant who is diagnosed with severe epilepsy, and the culture conflict that obstructs her treatment. Broader themes include Hmong customs and culture. The book has been cited by medical journals and lectures to help advocate for greater cultural competence.

Promoting Cultural Sensitivity: A Practical Guide for Tuberculosis Programs That Provide Services to Hmong Persons from Laos
This guide created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is designed to increase the knowledge and cultural sensitivity of health care providers serving Hmong people from Laos.

Ethics, Cultural Competence, and the Changing Face of America
The authors of this research article discuss how differing cultural dynamics set up the potential for various types of cultural conflict in the nation's examination rooms, including the relationship between religion and medicine. The article references the book "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down," as shared above. To address the changing patient-physician landscape, the paper argues for a broad scale intervention.

Hmong and Hispanic Communication Network (H2N)
Under the direction of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS), the Hmong and Hispanic Communication Network (H2N) collaborates with public health organizations, health systems, resource agencies and community organizations to provide Hmong and Hispanic communities with resources and tools for food/rental assistance, mental health services, domestic abuse, legal rights and more. Additionally, WIPPS offers a

variety of opportunities and events to educate and engage residents of Wisconsin on relevant health equity, diversity and inclusion topics.

Hmong American Community Certificate
The Hmong Institute offers the Hmong American Certificate Program and other trainings. It is designed to help providers and participants understand the history, refugee experience, culture and challenges of the Hmong American communities. Through these workshops, participants will have the opportunity to meet Hmong presenters and engage in activities and discussions that will help sharpen their knowledge and skills to serve Hmong clients or interact with Hmong individuals, leaders, youth and women.

Ultimately, practicing cultural humility requires ongoing learning and reflection. By taking the time to understand and respect the unique needs of the Hmong population, we can work together to provide the best possible care for all patients.

References/Sources

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