

Communicating with Your Chinese Patient

Adapted from *Culture Clues™*, University of Washington Medical Center, November 1, 2007;
<http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/cultureclues.html>.

Culture Clues™ was designed by the University of Washington Medical Center to help increase awareness about concepts and preferences of patients from diverse cultures. *Culture Clues™* is to be used along with information from the patient and family to guide your communication and your patient care.

Remember — every person is unique; always consider the individual's beliefs, needs, and concerns.



How does the Chinese culture deal with illness?

Explaining the cause of illness and disease

- A Chinese 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

- A Chinese 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.
- A Chinese patient may prefer to drink only hot liquids (water or tea) when sick or postpartum.
- A Chinese 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.

Helping your patient understand medicines

- A Chinese 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.



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.

- 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.

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 options.

Understanding communication about health care and treatments

- A Chinese patient may nod, smile, and/or say "yes" or "ya" to acknowledge he/she heard you, rather than that he/she understands or approves. They may be reluctant to say "no" to a doctor or health care provider because it may be considered disrespectful or cause disharmony.



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.

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.



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.