

Communicating with Your Russian 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 Russian culture deal with illness?

Explaining the cause of illness and disease

- Your patient and his or her family may believe that illness is caused by weather or social experiences, such as stress from the living situation or because of arguing with the family.
- Your patient may not like to take excessive medications. When an option, ask your patients if they prefer over-the-counter or homeopathic medicine.
- Spend time with the patient to show that the patient is cared for.

Communicating with the patient experiencing depression

- Mental health does not receive due respect in the former Soviet Union. Even the word “mental” has negative connotations because it is connected with “mental illness.”

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 Russian culture?

Making decisions about health care

- Often the extended family – a working-age couple, their children and parents – have immigrated together. They may have other family members who might have immigrated to the United States at other times.
- There are strong kinship bonds and everyone in the family provides support and service during a crisis.
- Decisions are made by the parents or the oldest child.
- The elders are respected.
- There are no major gender issues; decisions could be made by the mother, father, or eldest son or daughter.

Managing medical news

- 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.



What are the Russian culture's norms about touch?

Understanding norms about touch and body issues

- Direct eye contact with your patient is acceptable.
- A handshake is welcome from the health care provider.

Explaining touching

- Before touching your patient, always explain what will be done and why.
- Your gender as the health care provider is not likely to be an issue for your patient when doing peri-care or assessing urinary catheters.
- Your patient may prefer that opposite gender family members leave the room.
- Female patients may prefer a female OB/Gyn.

Understanding concerns about hygiene and health

- When sick, your patient may prefer sponge baths to daily baths or showers.
- Your patient may not wash hair as frequently when sick, especially when in the hospital, for fear of catching a cold or headache.
- Your patient may prefer to keep the room warm and the window shut.



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

- Birth region, education, and income level make a difference about how your patient perceives illness and makes health decisions. What questions do you want to ask to learn more about this patient and their family?