

# Communicating with Hmong Patients

---

- The material in this case study is generalized and is not intended to perpetuate stereotypes of individuals or groups of people
- Cultural traits may vary based on individual preference and level of acculturation – someone may have physical attributes of a specific heritage, but it does not mean he/she practices the traits of that culture
- Bottom line: Never Assume, Always Ask! - Never assume that every member of any culture holds the same beliefs and ideals

## How does the Hmong culture deal with illness?

### ***Helping Your Patient Feel Comfortable Gundersen Health System***

- Remember to find out if this is your patient's first visit to Gundersen Health System
  - **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 as a lost soul or a soul separated from the body.
- Most Hmong adults actually are very comfortable with duality between western and traditional Hmong health beliefs.

### ***Building Bridges between Traditional Remedies and Western Health Care***

- Your patient may use other traditional Hmong remedies as an initial approach for healing, especially during the early stages of illness. Some traditional Hmong therapies, including herbs, coining, cupping, and acupuncture are commonly used as an adjunct to western medicine.
- Some patients may prefer to drink only hot/warm water when sick, after surgery, and during postpartum.
- Some patients may try traditional approaches first, and will seek western medical care if these treatments fail.

### ***Helping Your Patient Understand Medicines***

- Some patients may believe that western medicine is too strong and may not take the full dose or complete the course of treatment as prescribe. 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 medical decisions made in the Hmong culture?**

#### ***Understanding Relationships***

- The Hmong 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.
  - **Ask your patient whom they want included in medical decisions. If patient does not want to make medical decisions for him/herself, let he/she know they need to prepare a Durable Power of Attorney for health care.**

#### ***Understanding Communication about Health Care and Treatments***

- Your patient may nod, smile 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 patient open-ended questions to verify understanding and encourage him/her to ask questions.**

### **What are the Hmong culture's norms about touch?**

#### ***Understanding Norms About Eye Contact and Body Language***

- Respect is shown to authority figures by 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.
  - **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.**