
Death & Dying

Asian Cultures & Customs

Compiled by
Asian Health Support Service
Waitemata District Health Board

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Introduction



- Health providers can benefit from an increased awareness and understanding of the different health beliefs and treatments of their patients
- “Culturally Competent Practice”
 - .. a set of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills that a “worker” must possess in order to work effectively with “clients” who are from a different culture than the “worker”..
- Generalisations – information provided relate to common practices or beliefs and should not be taken as accurate for all individuals of the particular culture or religion

Customs – Death & Dying

- Customs relating to death & dying can depend on a person's:
 - Religion
 - Age
 - Status in society
 - Marital status
 - Area they were residing
 - Manner of death

Asian Customs

- The individual countries that make up Asia have many differences in their cultures
- Among Asians, many of their strictly followed modern customs spring from their religious roots
- Many customs tend to be a result of blending of two or more of the predominant religions of a country
- Customs can vary greatly within a country
- Death customs and rituals provide the bereaved with a chance to fulfil their filial obligations to the deceased

In New Zealand

- Adherence to customs will depend on:
 - How long the person has been here
 - The dying person's wishes
 - Whether the person has family and/or friends in NZ
 - Ability to carry out their customs in a foreign country, e.g. no religious leader available to perform rites
 - Degree of acculturation

Giving Bad News

- In many Asian cultures, families will refrain from telling patients that they are dying
- In some countries even doctors would refrain from passing on news to a patient about a terminal illness
- In these situations, usually a male member of the family or the primary caregiver is given the prognosis
- Patients who are aware of their prognosis may hide it from their families so that they do not become distressed, particularly if a relative is pregnant or ill themselves
- Belief is that passing on bad news will result in loss of hope for the patient and hasten the arrival of death

Preparing for Death

- Traditionally people from Asian countries would return home to die.
- Today, people may prefer to keep the dying patient in hospital to ensure that everything possible can be done for them, otherwise they may feel guilty for not doing enough
- It is important that the family can accompany the dying patient, even in an unconscious state
- The patient may have specific rites to perform according to their religion to prepare for death

Passing On

- Different cultures have different customs for dealing with recently deceased – some may want the body untouched for a few hours so that they can mourn, others may want to wash and dress the body while it is still warm
- The family may have preferences for who can touch the body, e.g. only family may touch the body, or should be of the same sex as the deceased
- The body may be moved by the family so that it is facing North or South, depending on their culture or religion
- Relatives and friends may have different ways of mourning the deceased, from stoic solemnity, to soft weeping to loud cries – for someone who is highly regarded in the community, loud mourning is a way of showing respect

Passing On cntd

- Some families may have to call relatives from their homeland to come and see the deceased or to attend the funeral which could cause delays.
- In NZ, religious societies will help families to plan and make funeral arrangements

Chinese Customs

- Where possible the eldest son or closest relative must be present at time of death
- At funerals there is the custom of giving visitors sweets or food to eat or a towel to wipe away the bad things associated with death
- Mourning colours are white, black, brown or blue – bright colours, especially red are avoided as they are considered happy colours
- Traditionally cremation is not a common practice – burial of the dead is taken very seriously as it is believed that improper funeral arrangements can wreak ill fortune on the family of the deceased

Korean Customs

- Traditionally Korean beliefs value dying at home – it is considered a misfortune to bring that person's body back to the home
- This way of thinking is changing and nowadays hospitals in Korea have rooms to accommodate grieving families and for holding funerals
- Mourning period is usually 3 to 5 days or more and the body is never left unattended during this period if it is at home
- Generally if a person is deemed old enough they will be buried, but if they have died young or if they have no family they will be cremated
- Mourning clothes are made from white hemp

Indian Customs

- Many Hindu patients prefer to die at home – some may return to India
- Family members are likely to be present in large numbers as death nears
- Chanting and prayer, incense, and various rituals are part of the process.
- After death, ideally, the family should be the only ones to touch the body – a family member should clean the body and this person should be of the same sex as the deceased.
- After being cleaned, the body is wrapped in a white cloth
- Preference is for cremation and ideally, the ashes are spread over the holy river, The Ganges

Indian Customs cntd

- The men and boys of the family may shave their hair as a symbol of mourning for the dead
- The mourning family may wear all white and wish to have a Brahman at the funeral to perform a prayer and blessing

Japanese Customs

- The body of the deceased is usually washed at the hospital and the orifices stuffed with gauze or cotton.
- Traditionally the family would wash the body, however it has become more common to leave this up to the hospital
- Men are dressed in a suit (sometimes in a formal kimono) and women in a kimono
- The body is then taken to a place where a wake service is to be held and is usually not left unattended until the funeral – cremations are common
- Embalming is not a custom of the Japanese
- Mourning clothes are black suits, kimonos or dresses

Vietnamese Customs

- For Vietnamese, arranging a proper funeral for a loved one is one of the most filial things a person can do
- Intensive and extensive family and community involvement throughout the funeral process to help the family with their grieving process
- Deceased is bathed and dressed in their best clothes
- The body kept in the home for 3 or more days to let family and friends to pay their respects and is never left unattended until the funeral
- Family members would wear a piece of white or black cloth on their clothing everyday for 2 years – traditional mourning period

Burmese Culture

- Culturally the eldest relatives have the responsibility of telling a patient that they are dying
- To prepare for death, patients would prefer to chant (Buddists) or read from the Qur'an (Muslim)
- Preference is to die at home
- May not accept that their prognosis, may seek alternative treatments such as traditional medicine or black magic
- Mourning period is usually 3-5 days – body must be buried by the 7th day as it is believed the spirit must leave for the other world on this day (Buddhist culture)
- No preferences for preparing the body unless they are Muslim – Muslims have specific rituals

Religions

- Predominant Religions
 - Buddhism
 - Muslim (Islam)
 - Hinduism
 - Catholicism
 - Taoism
 - Confucianism
 - Christianity

Religions - Buddhism

- Believe that the dead are reborn at higher or lower planes of existence, depending on merits they have built up in this life and former lives
- To enter death in a positive state of mind in the company of monks and family members can contribute to rebirth on a higher level
- No dogmatic rules for what kind of care the body of the dead person should be given, aside that the process should be handled in a worthy and respectful way
- Deceased may be cremated or buried, depending on the wishes of the family
- White clothing and white headbands are symbols of mourning during the ceremony

Religions - Hinduism

- Believe in cyclical reincarnation of the soul, that they will be reborn into a future based primarily on their past thoughts and actions – death is viewed as a natural aspect of life
- May be averse to symptom control as suffering is believed to be inevitable and the result of *karma*
- Relatives gather around the dying person, trickle a few drops of milk, Ganga or other holy water into the person's mouth or on their lips and chant verses or read holy texts
- When death approaches, the sick person will be laid on the ground or in a cot to show respect for the earth which they have come from and also to help the soul to free itself from the body after death

Religions - Hinduism cntd

- Bodies are cremated – it is a ritual designed to do much more than dispose of the body; it is intended to release the soul from its earthly existence
- Standard cremation ceremony begins with the ritual cleansing, dressing and adorning of the body
- The body is then carried to the cremation ground as prayers are chanted
- An 11 day ritual is then performed to help the departed soul reach the heavens and join its ancestors

Religions - Muslim (Islam)

- When death approaches, a Muslim will recite Islam's most important sentence: "*There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger*"
- According to Islamic tradition, a dead person should preferably be buried within 24 hours
- A dead man is washed by a male relative or an Imam and a dead woman is washed by a female relative or a midwife
- The body is laid out with the arms along the side, and swaddled in white linen.
- Believe that on the day of resurrection, all good souls are awakened directly from their graves to live eternal life – therefore Muslims are against cremation

Religions - Muslim (Islam) cntd

- Before burial, the burial prayer must be recited
- The body is buried lying on its right side and with the face turned toward Mecca.

Summary

- Information provided relate to common customs and beliefs, but each family's customs will depend on which country and what area they came from, what religion(s) they follow, how integrated they are in NZ, etc.
- It is impossible to know or predict what someone's customs and beliefs may be
- It is important to be aware of this and where possible to try to accommodate people's wishes
- Speak to the patient's family to determine what their preferences and wishes may be for the dying patient

Resources

Information for this presentation were sourced from community members and from the following websites:

- <http://www.ethnomed.org.nz>
- <http://dying.about.com>
- <http://tanutech.com/japan/jfunerals.html>
- <http://mailerindia.com/hindu>
- <http://www.webindia123.com/punjab/death.htm>
- http://www.aarp.org/griefandloss/articles/46_a.html
- <http://www.harpweb.org.uk/content.php?section=women&sub=w4&con=w4-2>