

Guidance for staff on culture, faith and religion for hospice patients

Introduction

Spiritual well-being is important to good general health. In particular, people who are members of a religion may wish to practise some elements of their religion during their time in the hospice. In addition to this, there are some cultural aspects of different faiths which may arise during a patient's time here.

The purpose of these notes is to introduce some of the issues in this area, and offer some practical advice which should enable staff to meet the needs of patients so as to ensure a high quality of care.

Staff should note that it is good practice never to assume anything about a patient's faith or culture, particularly on ethnic grounds. If in doubt advice should be sought to avoid causing any offence.

General Guidance

Not all religions or philosophies are based on the same criteria. For instance, some religions require a strict compliance with certain laws and rules. These may seem strange in our modern, western, and largely non-religious society, but to the people who practise them they may be the most important things in life. Many religions also affirm the importance of certain ceremonies and ritual acts, and there may be strict taboos surrounding the end of a person's life. Some of these will have a significant effect on how we care for a patient and their family and friends.

In these notes you will find:

- ◆ background information to the main faiths
- ◆ special dietary requirements
- ◆ some of the more common religious and ritual practices
- ◆ information on how to treat the patient before and after death.

These notes are for general guidance only. There are wide variations in observances within most of the major religions, and it is important that **the patient or their family should always be consulted about what is appropriate for them.**

Christianity – General Introduction

Of the patients currently using hospices and hospitals, over 65% define themselves as Christian. But there are many different branches or

‘denominations’ of Christianity: this introductory note outlines the common ground between them.

Christianity has its origins with Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher who lived about 2000 years ago. Christianity began as a Jewish sect but before long separated completely from Judaism.

Mainstream Christians believe that Jesus was not only human but also divine – i.e., he is the ‘Son of God’. Traditional Christian belief focuses on the Trinity - a view of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and is summed up in the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith drawn up in the 4th century CE. The Christian scriptures are contained in the Bible, a collection of books dating from about 1000 BCE to 100 CE. A copy of the Bible – not just the New Testament – should be available for patients to read. The major Christian religious festivals are Easter (commemorating Jesus’ resurrection from the dead) and Christmas (commemorating his birth). Beyond these basic facts, there is a huge diversity of belief and practice between the different denominations.

Worship

Sunday is usually the main day for Christian worship.

Regular Sunday worship, led by the chaplains in turn, takes place in the chapel at 4.45 p.m. On Wednesdays, there is a service of Holy Communion at 3.00 p.m. [led in turn by the Church of England and Methodist Chaplains] and on Thursdays at 3.00 p.m., there is a Roman Catholic Mass.

It is good practice for ward staff to do what they can to help patients attend worship if they wish to do so.

Church of England - Church in Wales - Scottish Episcopalian Church - Church of Ireland - Anglican

The Church of England is the ‘Established’ Church in England, and many nominal and non-practising Christians will still rightfully claim membership of it.

Members of the Church of England are called ‘Anglican’, but ‘Anglican’ refers also to churches in many countries (including the Church in Wales, the Scottish Episcopalian Church, and the Church of Ireland) allied to the Church of England.

The Church of England sometimes describes itself as ‘Reformed Catholic’, but some members will call themselves ‘Protestant’, some ‘Anglo-Catholic’, or any number of variations.

Diet & Fasting

There are no dietary restrictions. Some may wish to observe a personal discipline of fasting during Lent (the period from Ash Wednesday to Easter).

Ritual Support

Anglicans may wish to receive Holy Communion. Other ritual support may include Anointing and Prayer (this ritual is no longer restricted to those in danger of death), and some Anglicans practise Confession (or Ministry of Reconciliation). Some Anglicans will not accept the ministry of a female priest. If this is a possibility, the patient should be asked first.

Death

Some Anglicans will want the Chaplain or other minister to be with them as they approach death. If this is requested, the priest will treat it as an emergency and should be called regardless of the time of day. The relatives of some Anglican patients may want to see a priest after the patient has died.

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

Catholic - Roman Catholic - Ukrainian Catholic

The (Roman) Catholic Church is a world-wide Christian church that acknowledges the supreme moral and doctrinal authority of the Pope. The Pope is the successor of the first Bishop of Rome – the Apostle St Peter.

The Ukrainian Catholic Church is 'in communion with' the Roman Catholic Church, but Ukrainian Catholic patients should always be offered the ministry of their own priest.

Diet & Fasting

No strict dietary restrictions. Some Catholics (especially older people) may abstain from meat on Fridays, and observe dietary discipline during Lent.

Ritual Support

Many Catholics will wish to receive Holy Communion. Some may also wish to make their Confession to a priest, and receive the Sacrament of the Sick.

Death

Some Catholics will want a priest to be present as they approach death. They may ask for the Sacrament of the Sick or 'Last Rites'. If this is requested, the priest will treat it as an

emergency and should be called regardless of the time of day. Many Catholic patients' families will want to see a priest after a death.

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

Orthodox - Eastern Orthodox - Greek/ Russian/Serbian, etc. Orthodox - Coptic

The Orthodox Church has its origins in some of the communities founded by the first Christians. It is therefore prevalent in the Eastern Mediterranean (especially Greece) and North Africa. Russia adopted Orthodoxy in the 10th century CE.

The Coptic Church is the Church of Egypt, separated from Orthodoxy for many centuries but now reconciled. Orthodox patients should always be offered the ministry of their own clergy, some may consent to seeing a Church of England priest.

Diet & Fasting

There are no normal dietary restrictions. Many Orthodox will observe a sometimes strict discipline of fasting during Lent, and some during Advent. It should be noted that the Orthodox Church observes a different calendar from that used by Western Christians - Christmas and Easter are about 12-13 days after the 'Western' date.

Ritual Support

Orthodox patients may wish to see a priest or 'spiritual director' regularly, and receive prayer and ritual support from them.

Death

The patient may request the presence of the clergy as death approaches. If this is requested, the priest will treat it as an emergency and should be called regardless of the time of day. The family may wish to see a member of the clergy after death.

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

**Methodist - Baptist – Quaker - Presbyterian
(Church of Scotland) - United Reformed Church - Salvationist
(Salvation Army) -
Free/Independent Church - Other Christian: e.g., Pentecostalist, New
Jerusalem Church, New Testament Church of God, House Church,
Seventh Day Adventist.**

There are many Christian denominations which have their origins as distinct communities some time after the 16th century CE. For instance, the Methodist Church became a separate entity from the Church of England in the 18th century. Each has its own ministers. Most of these patients will accept the ministry of Chaplains of other denominations, though it is important to ask the patient first, and to inform the Chaplain of the patient's denomination.

Diet & Fasting

No normal restrictions.

Ritual Support

Some patients from some denominations may wish to receive Holy Communion. Some will ask the Chaplain or members of their own church to pray with them from time to time.

Death

Some families may wish to see a minister after a death. Sometimes a patient may wish a minister or other Christian friends to be with them as they approach death.

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

Other Churches, e.g., Christadelphians, Unitarians

There are many other denominations that have their origins as distinct communities some time after the 16th century CE. Though some may describe themselves as "Christian", their non-acceptance of the Trinity and/or their non-acceptance of Jesus Christ as being divine would lead others from mainstream Christian churches to disagree with this description. Some of these patients will accept the ministry of Chaplains of other denominations, though it is important to ask the patient first, and to inform the Chaplain of the patient's denomination.

Diet & Fasting

No normal restrictions.

Ritual Support

Some patients from some denominations may wish to receive Holy Communion. Some will ask the Chaplain or members of their own church to pray with them from time to time.

Death

Some families may wish to see a minister after a death.

Sometimes a patient may wish a minister or other Christian friends to be with them as they approach death.

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

Mormon - Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

The Church was founded in the USA in the 19th century CE by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Mormons accept the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible, and also have their own scripture, the Book of Mormon, written by Jewish refugees who crossed the Atlantic around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE. All Mormons are expected to have an active ministry within the Church, often including time spent as Missionaries.

Diet & Fasting

Stimulants are forbidden – most notably caffeine (coffee, tea, cola drinks), alcohol, and tobacco. Caffeine and alcohol are, however, accepted as ingredients in medicines. Meat is eaten sparingly or not at all.

Ritual Support

The patient's family will normally inform the local Mormon Church, and may invite ministers to pray with the patient.

Death

After death, routine last offices are appropriate. However, some Mormons who have undergone a special Temple Ceremony wear a sacred undergarment, which must be replaced on the body after washing.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses class themselves as a Christian community, though they do not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. They accept the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. They have very strong beliefs concerning God's intervention in the world at the end of time, which they expect to come soon. It is not unknown for Witnesses to be disappointed or distressed if they expect to die before the end of the world.

Diet & Fasting

Witnesses adhere strongly to the New Testament prohibition on ingesting blood or blood products, and meat from animals which have been strangled.

Blood and blood products are usually not acceptable in medical treatment, and the patient will often have a very clear idea of their own moral boundaries in this matter. **This should be clearly documented in the patient's case notes and on any consent form which the patient is asked to sign.**

Ritual Support

The patient may like to invite other Witnesses and leaders of their community to be with them from time to time.

Death

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

Jewish - Judaism

The Jewish faith has its origins with Abraham, who lived about 2000 BCE. The Hebrew Scriptures are equivalent in content to the Christian Old Testament. Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures are available in English, though some Jewish patients will prefer a copy in Hebrew. Many Jews would object to being offered a Christian Bible containing the New Testament.

There is a range of traditions within Judaism, ranging from the conservative Orthodox to the liberal Reform Jews. The main outward feature of the faith is observance of the Law (*Torah*) given by God to Moses.

The more conservative a Jewish person's tradition, the more rigorous and detailed will be their observance of the *Torah*.

Diet & Fasting

Jewish food law is called *kashrut*, and permitted food is called *kosher*. Pig-meat and shellfish are the most well-known prohibitions: these are abhorrent to nearly all Jews. Meat may have to be ritually prepared to ensure no blood is left in it. Meat and dairy products may not be mixed in the same meal. A kosher diet may be ordered, but some Jewish people may prefer to have food prepared at home and brought to them.

Fasting is associated with certain religious festivals. The main festivals are New Year (called *Rosh Hashanah*), which usually falls in September, and the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) ten days later. Another very important time is Passover, which always occurs within a few weeks after the Spring Equinox (March 21st). Strict dietary and ritual rules apply around Passover. It is unlikely that a Jewish person would wish to be away from home at this time.

Ritual support

Jewish patients will generally be well supported by their family and friends. They may ask to see a Rabbi.

Death

Some Jewish people refuse to talk or think about death 'in advance' – life and death are in God's hands, and we should not presume to know the mind of God. This can make the approach to death a difficult time for a patient and their family.

After death, if relatives are not present, staff should close the patient's eyes, placing the arms straight at the side of the body, and remove all tubes and needles, covering the incisions with waterproof plasters.

A funeral and burial should take place within 24 hours – the Registrar will facilitate this wherever possible, and an advance warning to the Registrar's office will help.

Post-mortems are generally only allowed where there is a legal necessity.

Muslim - Islam

Muslims hold the belief that 'there is only one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet'. The sacred writings of Islam, the Qur'an, were revealed to Mohammed by God. A copy of the Qur'an should be available for Muslim patients *in Arabic*, since it is held to be untranslatable. Patients and their visitors should be given opportunity and space to pray five times a day, though rules on prayer, fasting, etc., are often relaxed for seriously ill people. If a patient does wish to continue to perform their prayers, they may need to keep their prayer mat to hand.

According to the Qur'an, the purpose of life is to prepare for death. There is a strong belief in the Day of Judgement. These beliefs may have an important effect on how a Muslim patient approaches death.

Diet & Fasting

Pig-meat is forbidden, as is alcohol. Any meat should be *halal*, i.e., ritually slaughtered. A halal diet may be ordered for Muslim patients. *Ramadan* is a month of fasting (from before sunrise until after sunset each day). Ramadan does not occur at the same time each 'Western' year. Rules on fasting are often relaxed for ill people.

Ritual Support

Muslim patients will wish to observe segregation of the sexes. A person of the same gender should carry out medical examinations wherever possible.

Women may wish to wear their own clothes rather than the Western-style night-dress.

As death approaches, members of the patient's family may wish to gather to recite prayers and passages from the Qur'an with them. The patient should be positioned so that they are facing the city of Mecca – i.e., *south-east*.

Death

After death, the body should be treated with great sensitivity: the soul remains associated with the body for some time, and some Muslims believe that during this time, the body can still feel pain. Staff should not wash the body, and if possible should avoid touching the body. If staff need to remove IV tubes, catheters, etc., they should wear gloves to prevent direct contact with the body.

The family will wish to prepare the body for burial. The preparation will be carried out by family members of the same gender. If this is not possible, then staff wearing disposable gloves should straighten the dead patient's limbs and turn the head towards the right shoulder.

If the body has to be removed to the Mortuary, it should not be uncovered.

The burial should take place within 24 hours: the family will make the necessary arrangements, and the Registrar will usually do everything possible to facilitate this.

Post mortems are not usually agreed to unless required by the Coroner.

It is considered normal and praiseworthy for Muslims to express their emotions freely at the death of a relative. They should be allowed the space and time to do this, and should be offered privacy.

Hinduism

Hinduism is the dominant religion of India. There is a great diversity of belief among Hindus. Generally Hinduism affirms the unity of the Divine, but this can be understood in different ways. There are also many gods and goddesses, who represent aspects of the Divine. The most important gods are Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the destroyer. Hindus often have a devotion to one particular god; this personal god is called the *ishtha-devata*. The body of Hindu sacred writings is very large, but modern Hindus tend to focus on the *Bhagavad Gita* which contains teaching on right living.

Diet & Fasting

In Hinduism it is forbidden to eat beef. Many Hindus also avoid pig-meat; some will not eat eggs; some are completely vegetarian.

Ritual Support

Hindu patients may wish to have statues or pictures of the gods with them. These should be treated with utmost care and respect. Many Hindus meditate every day, and will often need to be alone for this. Ritual cleanliness can be very important, and a Hindu patient may wish to wash in running water (i.e. a shower) before meditating. Modesty is also important; patients may wish to be examined only by a doctor of the same gender.

Death

Most Hindu patients will wish to die at home, if at all possible. A dying patient will be visited by their family, and may ask to see a Hindu priest. The priest may bless the patient by tying a sacred thread round their wrist, sprinkling them with water from the River Ganges, and placing a sacred *tulsi* leaf in their mouth.

After death, the family should be consulted before anyone touches the body. The family will usually want to wash the body at home. If staff have to attend to this, disposable gloves should be worn; the dead patient's limbs should be straightened and their eyes closed; jewellery, sacred threads, and other religious items should not be removed; and the body should be wrapped in a plain white sheet.

Cremation should follow as quickly as possible after death.

Paganism

Modern Paganism is a very diverse set of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. Some of these have their origins in the pre-Christian religions of northern Europe. Many Pagans believe in a Goddess of the earth, sometimes described as Mother Earth or the Mother Goddess. Some believe in other gods also, usually associated with aspects of nature or with particular places. They generally have a deep respect for nature and the natural environment. The pagan ethic is: 'So far as it hurts none, do as you will.'

'**Pantheism**' is a set of beliefs which overlaps with modern Paganism. The characteristic is a belief that everything has a divine nature about it. Therefore, every physical object is to be treated with reverence and respect.

Diet & Fasting

Many pagans are vegetarian or vegan.

Ritual support

Rituals and prayer are very important to many Pagans, and their needs in this area should be respected. Many have a strong belief in complementary therapies such as herbalism, spiritual healing, and crystal healing. Especially in the Wiccan branch of Paganism, there is a belief in the efficacy of certain prayers, blessings, and rituals. Again, this should be respected as far as possible.

Death

Pagan beliefs about death vary. Most believe in the immortality of the soul, and many believe in reincarnation. For any special requirements, the patient's relatives should be consulted. After death, routine last offices are appropriate. The right to a non-Christian or Pagan funeral may have to be asserted with funeral directors.

Buddhism

In Buddhism, the Buddha is not a god, but the founder of a philosophy of life and death. 'Buddha' means 'the Enlightened One'. Buddhists believe in the attainment of Enlightenment by meditation and spiritual and physical discipline.

There are many differences between different kinds of Buddhism. Many of the different variants are present in 'Western' Buddhism, though Tibetan (Mahayana) Buddhism tends to be popular among western converts. The patient or their family will advise on any detailed requirements.

One of the basic beliefs of Buddhism is reincarnation or rebirth. How a person is reincarnated depends partly on the frame of mind in which they die.

Diet & Fasting

Traditions vary. Many Buddhists are vegetarian. Some will abstain from alcohol. Buddhists are likely to object to medication which affects their consciousness.

Ritual Support

Many Buddhist patients will request to see a monk or spiritual teacher: an address or contact number should be established on admission. The patient will also need peace and quiet so that they can meditate. Preparation for death is very important.

Death

Buddhists will normally wish to be as conscious as possible when death approaches, and it is important to negotiate issues of medication at this time. They may ask their spiritual teacher to be with them, to chant passages of Buddhist scripture. Some Buddhists believe that the spirit may remain associated with the body (and may continue to meditate) for some time after 'physical' death. The body should not be disturbed during this time – the spiritual teacher will advise on when the body may be moved.

After death, routine last offices are usually appropriate.

Baha'i

Baha'i is a recently formulated faith (it began in 1844 CE) which is gaining popularity, partly because of its affirmation that all religions have a common foundation, its concerns for equality and justice, and its positive attitude to modern science-based culture.

Since 1963 Baha'is have been guided by the Universal House of Justice in Israel. Baha'is see the central figures of other religions – including the Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus – as 'manifestations of God'. The founders of the Baha'i faith were Ali-Muhammad, known as the Bab (1819-1850), and Husayn Ali, known as Baha'u'llah (1817-1892).

Diet & Fasting

There are no usual dietary restrictions.

Ritual Support

Adult Baha'is are obliged to pray and read the scriptures daily. In order to pray, Baha'is turn in the direction of Baha'u'llah's burial place near Akka in Israel, roughly south east.

Death

Routine last offices are appropriate.

Sikhism

Sikhism was founded in the 16th century CE by the spiritual teacher Guru Nanak. Sikhism is a community-based religion, with no priesthood. The centre of the Sikh community is the 'gurdwara' where Sikhs meet for prayer, study, and other communal activities. The Sikh holy book is called the 'Guru Granth Sahib'. One of the basic teachings of Sikhism is the equality of all people. Sikhs were once a race of warriors, dedicated to defending the oppressed.

Diet & Fasting

Sikhs are forbidden to eat beef, and many are vegetarian.

Ritual support

Male Sikhs wear five symbols:

- ◆ uncut hair, covered by the turban
- ◆ steel comb
- ◆ steel bangle
- ◆ steel dagger or short sword
- ◆ white shorts.

These symbols should not be disturbed and unless it is absolutely necessary patients should not be asked to remove them. If for whatever reason there is absolutely no alternative to removing one of the symbols, the patient and their family should be consulted with great sensitivity.

Many healthcare

professionals are uncomfortable with the idea of the 'kirpan' or ceremonial dagger. In practice these days the kirpan is very small, blunt, and inoffensive: it may be in the form of a brooch, or even embroidered on clothing.

Death

Sikhs believe in reincarnation, so death may be less threatening to them than it might otherwise be. When a Sikh patient is near death, they may be visited by many members of their community (not just their family), who will read to them from the Guru Granth Sahib. This spiritual care of the dying is an important community activity and should be facilitated as far as possible.

After death, the religious symbols must not be removed from the body. The family should be consulted regarding last offices. Death is followed by cremation as soon as possible.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism is a diverse set of beliefs and practices. There are Spiritualist Churches, but attendance at these represents only one of many ways of expressing Spiritualist beliefs. One of the defining features is a belief in the spirit world, where the souls of the dead continue to live. Spiritualists believe that these spirits can be contacted and spoken to, sometimes through a medium, or specially gifted person. Some Spiritualists have a spirit guide, who helps them through this life. Some will practise various ways of foretelling the future.

Diet & Fasting

No normal restrictions.

Ritual support

Some Spiritualists will ask for others to pray for them. Sometimes prayer may be accompanied by the 'laying-on of hands' or other rituals.

Death

Their beliefs give many Spiritualists a strong confidence in the face of death: it is merely the transition from this world to the spirit world. Some may ask people to pray for them as they prepare to make the transition.

After death, routine last offices are appropriate.

Humanist - Agnostic - Atheist

The distinctions between things like 'humanist', 'atheist', and 'agnostic' can be subtle but are often important. If someone

describes themselves in these terms, it does not mean that they do not need or want spiritual care, but it should be offered with tact and sensitivity, emphasising that such care is not just 'religious'.

Atheists affirm that there is no God. They may also reject any 'spiritual' concepts, such as the 'soul'.

Agnostics fall into two broad types: (a) *We cannot know* whether or not there is a God, or, (b) *I don't know* whether or not there is a God. Agnosticism can vary from those who simply haven't given any thought to 'spiritual' matters, to those whose agnosticism is a precise and delicate balance between what can and cannot be known about the world in general.

Humanists will often describe themselves as agnostic or atheist, but in addition strongly affirm the value and dignity of human life in itself. Humanists may or may not be actually hostile to people of religious belief. They will often be people of strongly-held ethical principles. Some self-declared humanists may have connections with the British Humanist Association.

Diet & Fasting

No restrictions.

Ritual support

Normally none, but the British Humanist Association has developed a number of Humanist rituals, and some Humanists may request support from someone from the Association.

Death

No special arrangements. After death, routine last offices are appropriate. The option of a non-religious funeral should be given, and may have to be asserted with funeral directors.

Glossary of Religious Terms

Holy Communion

Also 'Communion', 'the Eucharist'. The full ceremony of Holy Communion may be called 'the Mass', 'the Sacrament', or 'the Lord's Supper'. This is the Christian ceremony in which Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples is commemorated. It involves the blessing or 'consecration', and the consuming, of bread and wine. Beliefs vary about the meaning of this act – to some it is a 'remembering' of Jesus; to others the bread and wine *become* Jesus in a real sense. The consecrated bread and wine may be brought to a patient so that they can receive Communion without going through the full ceremonial.

Anointing

Also 'Sacrament of the Sick'. A Christian ritual in which a small amount of blessed olive oil is smeared on the patient's forehead. Sometimes this is done with prayers for the patient's return to health, and the oil is seen as an outward sign of God's care for that person. Some patients will request this ritual as a preparation for death, in which case they may refer to it as the 'Last Rites'.

Sabbath

Also 'Shabbat'. The Jewish weekly day of rest. It lasts from before sunset on Friday until after sunset on Saturday. No work may be done on the Sabbath – this may include something as basic as turning on a light switch.

Passover

Also 'Pesach'. An annual festival in the Jewish calendar, always during March or April. It commemorates Moses' leading the Israelites to freedom from their slavery in Egypt.

Torah

The Jewish Law, equivalent to the first five books of the Bible.

Rabbi

A minister of a Jewish synagogue or congregation.

Qur'an

The Muslim scriptures, dictated to the Prophet Mohammed by God through the angel Gabriel.

Ramadan

A month of strict fasting observed by Muslims. No food is taken during the hours of daylight. This rule may be relaxed for sick people.

Eid

The festival which marks the end of Ramadan.

Bhagavad Gita

One of the holy books of Hinduism. Others include the *Upanishads*, the *Vedas*, and the *Mahabharata*.

Five Ks

The five religious symbols worn by male Sikhs.

Guru Granth Sahib

The Sikh scriptures, containing the teachings of the gurus.

Wicca

A branch of modern Paganism. The old-fashioned terms 'witchcraft' and 'witch' are unacceptable to many Wiccans.

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