



Culture Matters



Information About Hmong Culture and Health Care

Culture Focus: Spotlight on Hmong Population



Who are they? The Hmong in the United States are a relatively small Southeast Asian minority group who began living in Minnesota at the close of the Vietnam War.

Language: The Hmong have their own language, called Hmoob (Hmong in English). It has many dialects; however, most Hmong speak either white or green Hmong. Hmong was not a written language until the late 1960s. It has few medical terms.

Clan social structure: Hmong are organized into clans, which are determined by ancestral lineage (great, great grandfather) and which traditional ceremonies they practice. Clans are not constituted by last name. Families have two special ceremonies to remember their ancestors. If families practice the same ceremony, then they probably belong to the same ancestor. Hmong families tend to be large and the extended family is considered to be part of the family.

Religious leader: The Hmong shaman or the clan leaders are the key persons for decision making and for conducting religious ceremonies. They make all decisions related to spiritual healing.

Religion: Hmong practiced Hmong religious beliefs in their native land. Hmong in the United States have continued many of their traditional beliefs and religious practices. A number also have become Christians.



Verbal/non-verbal communications: Hmong may not communicate dissatisfaction with the quality of health care. Instead, they will refuse care and go somewhere else for treatment. Older Hmong listen attentively to health professionals, but will avoid direct eye contact because it is rude.

Time: Traditionally, Hmong farmers organized their activities around the sun—sun up and sun down. Recent immigrants are unaccustomed to doing things at specific times, and this becomes an area of difficulty for them. As a result, information about appointment times, etc., needs to be written and carefully explained.

Health Care

Medical conditions due to refugee status: Older Hmong (30 years of age or older) may have long-term effects from "yellow rain" or other war zone chemicals and malnutrition. Many recent refugees seeking western treatment have intestinal parasites, tuberculosis, anemia, depression, or post traumatic stress syndrome. Older Hmong may have trouble breathing (dyspnea). Constipation and diarrhea are more common due to the lack of roughage in the diet.

Experience with western medicine: Hmong have been exposed to western medicine since the 1950s.



Cause of illness: Traditional Hmong view illness from a holistic perspective. Perfect health is a balance between the spirit and the body. When someone is ill, Hmong will seek out the help of a shaman to determine if the cause of the illness is in the realm of the spirit. Spiritual causes require religious remedies. Hmong also recognize physical causation. Physical causes require an appropriate response such as medication, various Hmong treatments or seeking western medical care. Traditional spiritual causes of illness include evil spirits or because one's own spirit has left the body. Someone may be ill because an evil spirit or an ancestor is unhappy with the individual or that individual's family. Perhaps someone has done something to offend the family's spirits or ancestors. An illness also can arise because someone has cursed the family. Some Hmong accept the western view of the cause of illness along with their traditional

view.

Spiritual healing: Many Hmong practice spiritual healing. Good health comes from souls living within each person. Illness or an invasive procedure can cause soul loss. Spiritual healing involves retrieving the lost soul from another plane of existence. Hmong will conduct healing ceremonies in the hospital or in the home.

Death: Hmong who follow traditional religious views believe that death is merely a phase people go through when one is passing from this plane of existence to the next. Life is not seen from a western point of view as a journey with a beginning and an ending point. Rather, life is viewed from an eastern point of view as a continuous journey. People are destined to live to a certain age. When the age is reached, Hmong understand it is time for the person to depart. Hmong believe the spirit will reincarnate.

Dying: Hmong want to dress the dying person in fine Hmong clothes. Doing so tells the community the person has lived a good life, will be missed and can make a proper entrance into the next world. Religious ceremonies conducted on behalf of the dying person are intended to make the person happier.



Treatments and practices: Many Hmong continue to use traditional herbal treatments. Others will use herbal treatments as complements to western treatments. Still others are adopting western medical practices. Traditionally, someone who is sick is required to eat hot food and certain vegetables. Hmong prefer hot chicken and rice. They drink hot or warm water. Within 30 days of childbirth, Hmong mothers will usually only eat warm foods.

Surgery: Surgery is usually not acceptable. However, if laboratory or other tests identify a disease, then Hmong are willing to consider surgery.

Organ donation/ blood transfusions: Traditionally, both are unacceptable. Younger Hmong, however, are more accepting of these medical procedures.

Complementary medicine: Herbal medicine is widely practiced, and some Hmong will often exhaust this resource and other traditional practices before seeking western medical remedies. Hmong women pass their knowledge along to their female relatives.

<http://xpedio02.childrenshc.org/stellent/groups/public/@xcp/@web/@integrativemed/documents/policyreferenceprocedure/web009310.asp>

An Asian View of Cultural Differences

The world view held by people from Asian cultures differs in many ways from the world view of people from Northern European heritage. The following, “An Asian View of Cultural Differences” by Mai Van Trang provides some great examples of these differences:

<http://www.laocenter.org/images/kwanyin2.PDF>



Practical Guide for Clinicians with Hmong Patients



In order to develop therapeutic relationships with Hmong patients, physicians and other health professionals need to be aware of their patients' religious and spiritual concerns. Through interviews with Hmong patients and shamans, the following questions were developed to enhance communication:

1) Do you practice the new ways or the old ways?

This is the equivalent of asking, “Are you Christian or animist?” The answer to this question helps physicians understand their patient's subjective experience of, and subjective understanding of, ultimate reality. A physician may respond, “Tell me about

it,” or ask follow-up questions, including: How is this important in your life? What do you want me as your doctor to be aware of? As a result, patients will often feel “heard.” This is important for efficient, effective, and satisfactory communication and care. Many Hmong Christians may shy away from the shaman ceremonies because these are seen as going against their current beliefs and practices. While Hmong animists continue to call on the shaman and other traditional healers, they may also call on Christian leaders, pastors, and priests to help them. Some Hmong individuals and families have gone from animism to Christianity back to animism based upon health and illness circumstances.

2) Are you working with any other healers?

The answer to this question helps physicians comprehend if and how their patient and/or patient's family see their religious and/or spiritual beliefs as resources. This question may help physicians determine appropriate referrals to chaplains, clergy, or traditional healers for complementary spiritual care.

3) Are you using any herbs for your condition?

The spectrum of traditional Hmong healing practices includes herbalism (kws tshuaj) and a variety of home remedies. These herbs are pharmacologically active, albeit mildly, when used appropriately. Research into their indications and contraindications is being conducted by the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing and the Bell Museum of Natural History's herbarium.

4) What else are you using to help with your condition?

The small percentage of Hmong people who do not seek Western treatment will try a variety of traditional healing practices. However, some converted Christians continue to use herbal medicine and traditional home remedies, such as cupping (txhuav), spoon rubbing (kav), fright release (dhaws ceeb), etc.

The above is a condensed version of a larger article. To view the entire article, click on the link below:

<http://www.mnmed.org/publications/MNMed2002/June/Plotnikoff.html>

Cultural Health Information

Diabetes

Hmong

- The adoption of a Western diet and sedentary life style has lead to a dramatic increase in the prevalence of diabetes even in Asian Americans that show no or little weight gain.²

References for information found above:

¹ <http://www.tufts.edu/communications/stories/011701HispanicsAndDiabetes.htm>

² <http://www.betterdiabetescare.nih.gov/ISSUESculturalcompetencytips.htm>

Resources

Hmong for Health Care Workers

Stratis Health encourages clinics to check out the “Hmong for Health Care Workers” resource on how to provide culturally-competent care to Hmong patients. To access the guide, go to:

<http://www.health-careers.org/resources/Hmong%20Handbook%20Revised%2003-06.pdf>.

Health Care Information in English and Hmong

<http://spiral.tufts.edu/hmong.html>

<http://www.hmonghealth.org/illustration/>

Suggested Reading

- *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* by Mai Neng Moua
- *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman – The story of a Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures.
- *Healing by Heart: Clinical and Ethical Case Stories of Hmong Families and Western Providers* by Kathleen A. Culhane-Pera (a Minnesota physician).

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