Pocket Guide of Culturally Competent Communication

Antonella Surbone, MD, PhD, FACP and Walter F. Baile, MD

Fundamental Principles:
- Cross-cultural medical encounters are increasing in multi-ethnic societies.
- Cultural factors influence cancer survival rates and patient/family quality of life.
- Cultural competence is a set of attitudes, skills and knowledge that can be acquired.
- Respecting cultural diversity is key to delivering comprehensive cancer care across the illness trajectory.
- Cultural competence promotes patient-centered care through sensitive negotiation of therapeutic goals.

The following vary across cultures:
- role of autonomy in decision making,
- support available to help patients cope,
- role expectations of sick persons,
- beliefs about cancer causation,
- EOL preferences (AD, DNR, hospice),
- patient/clinician/institution relationships.

Why Cultural Competence Can Help You Plan the Patient’s Care
- Discussion of cancer is a taboo in some cultures where the word “cancer” is still associated with death or guilt & shame.
- Patients from diverse cultures rely on different healing practices that can often be incorporated into care plans.
- Ethnic/genetic/cultural differences can affect treatment response directly or through lifestyles.

Where You Need Cultural Competence Most
- Truth-telling about diagnosis, prognosis and risks
- Discussion of death and EOL choices
- Issues related to: - family involvement in information and decision making - use of alternative and complementary cancer treatments - reliance on spirituality and religion for healing - attitudes toward psychological and behavioral counseling - concerns regarding clinical trials
7 Areas to Cover in Taking a Cultural History - "BALANCE"

B Beliefs & Values (that influence perceptions of illness)
A Ambience (living situation and family structure)
L Language & Health Literacy (role of interpreters, accuracy of translation, metaphorical meanings)
A Affiliations (community ties, religious & spiritual beliefs)
N Network (social support system)
C Challenges (cancer-related risks of home, work & life conditions)
E Economics (socioeconomic status & community resources)

Pearls of Wisdom
- Sensitivity to cultural issues enhances trust between patients and doctors.
- Initial time investment avoids later misunderstandings and/or bedside ethical conflicts.
- Personalized cancer care incorporates patients’ and families’ culture and draws on community resources.
- Learn about the cultural groups most frequently treated at your institution.
- Incorporate cultural into social history.
- Be prepared to briefly describe your own cultural background.

Pearls of Wisdom (cont’d.)
- Always clarify your institutional and ethical norms in matters of truth-telling and decision making.
- Recognize your own biases toward some cultural attitudes and practices.
- Be aware how different families involve themselves in decision making.
- Be sensitive to different cultural meanings of suffering and caregiving.
- Open your mind to different ways to promote health and cope with illness.

Resources
Cancer, Culture, and Health Disparities: Time to Chart a New Course?
Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, Annalyn Valdez Dadia, Mimi C. Yu & Antonella Surbone, CA Cancer J Clin 2010; 60: 12-39
For more information visit: www.mdanderson.org/icare

Antonella Surbone, M.D., Ph.D. F.A.C.P.
Lecturer in Bioethics
Professor of Medicine
New York University Medical School
I*CARE Program Faculty

Walter F. Baile, M.D.,
Professor of Behavioral Science
Director, Interpersonal Communication And Relationship Enhancement (I*CARE) Program
Department of Faculty Development
The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

Cathy Kirkwood, MPH
I*CARE Project Director

© The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center 2011