

Pat Coutts Answers a Question on The Effects of Cultural Background on Patient Communication and Adherence to Treatment



By Patricia Coutts

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Q I know cultural beliefs can impact on the care that I can offer and the care that my patients will accept, so how do I recognize and deal with cultural differences that may affect my patients' care?

A "Treat the whole patient not just the hole in the patient" is a phrase that health-care providers working with people who have chronic wounds often pronounce. An important part of treating the whole patient is for the team to have a cultural awareness of the individual and their family and caregivers regarding any issues that may be significant to the plan of care. Some of these issues might involve who the patient perceives is in charge, pain and pain management, traditions around the use of herbal medications, customs around

The Webster Dictionary defines culture as "education, training, development of mental and bodily faculties and qualities, refinement of taste, keenness and balance of intellect and judgment, elegance and manners."

footwear and beliefs concerning specific days of the week or dates on the calendar. Let's look at each of these topics.

Who's in Charge?

Many elderly individuals may believe that the "the doctor knows best" and therefore is in charge. They do not want to take an active role in the decision-making around their care as they do not think they have the expertise or

anything of value to add to these decisions. These people, in most cases, have a good sense of what they are able to do and tolerate but are hesitant to say anything lest they offend someone and possibly hinder their care. Often, the older individual may be accompanied by a family member. The family member may proceed to be the main participant in the discussion of care at the visit. Is this involvement part of this

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Who's in Charge? Knowing that some patients are reluctant to speak up and understanding the relationship between family members and the client can be important steps in getting clients to participate in their own care.

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individual patient's cultural background? Because it is important for the patient to participate as much as possible in their care plan, if they choose to do so, it is important for us as health-care professionals to know the relationship between the family members. To encourage the older individual to speak up and become an active participant in his or her own plan of care can be very challenging but very rewarding.

Homeopathic Remedies

Herbal medications are another area that people have strong beliefs about. They will sometimes fail to mention that they are taking these medications because the health-care provider may not approve or they will be thought of as "silly" for taking them. These herbal medications may enhance or diminish the effect of other treatment modalities that may be prescribed. Some individuals may have traditional ways—for example, folk medicine—of treating various conditions. It is important for the health-care professional to be aware of these traditions and the possible merit for their use. As well, it is important to look for ways that their use could be a detrimental factor in treatment—for example, as a confounding factor that may be contributing to a problem with a contact dermatitis.

Homeopathic Remedies
Assessment of traditions around treatment modalities and rationale is a basis for discussion with the client when developing a care plan.

Pain

Pain and pain management is another area that is greatly influenced by past history and beliefs. Some patients with chronic wounds believe that because there is a wound, there should be pain and therefore they should "just put up with it." Some patients and families believe that taking medication for pain will lead to addiction to that particular medication. This belief is not confined to the older individual but is seen in the younger population as well.

Some cultures are very stoic about pain while other cultures appear to be more intolerant of it. Both of these groups provide an assessment challenge to the health-care professional to provide the right medication in the right amount that the patient will utilize to achieve the most effective pain relief. Part of that challenge is for the health-care provider to understand the patient's perception and understanding of their situation and the cause of their pain.

Pain Relief

It is important to realize that each person experiences pain differently, making an individual approach to a care plan essential.

Footwear

As wound-care clinicians, we are all aware of the importance of off-loading for an individual with diabetes who has a wound on their foot or for a patient with a pressure ulcer on the foot. People from certain cultures do not wear shoes inside their homes, or wear different footwear inside and outside the

house. We ask people to wear their shoes and orthotics or other off-loading devices at all times. Do we, as health-care providers, stop to consider the cultural implications of our request?

Some patients may not have the financial resources to have two completely different pairs of shoes and orthotics or offloading devices. We may need to negotiate with the individual to have orthotics that will fit in both the shoes they wear outside and in the footwear that is worn inside.

Some patients have certain types of footwear that need to be worn because of their occupation; others have traditionally worn a particular type of shoe and are not willingly going to change. The team approach is very important in developing an innovative way to provide protection and to keep the pressure off the affected area that is acceptable to the individual and the health-care team.

Footwear

Identification of the individual's traditional use and perception of footwear may lead to a requirement for patient education and extra emphasis on adherence in order to ensure success.

Date and Time

Something as simple and common as the date or day of the week may have specific significance to some people, and because of this, they may not attend appointments. Being aware of these issues and making appointments on an appropriate day at a time that is suitable for the patient, their families and the health-care pro-

fessional will help to give the patient continuity of care.

Date and Time

Pay attention to specific days, dates (holidays) and times of the day that may interfere with an individual's ability to adhere to their plan of care.

Culture is developed from beliefs, traditions and customs that create a way of life. We, as health-care providers, come into contact with many different cultures each day. It is essential that we endeavor to be aware of the subtle and not-so-subtle cultural aspects of individuals when we are working with them as a member of the team to develop their plan of care.

Action Plan for Dealing with Cultural Differences

1. Acknowledge that *all* patients have beliefs, customs and traditions that may affect their health care. (It is important to acknowledge that you, too, have cultural beliefs, customs and traditions that influence how you practise health care.)
2. Conduct a thorough interview with each patient to determine if their beliefs, customs or traditions may positively or negatively affect a treatment or prevention plan.
3. Ask patients to repeat back to you in their own words what the treatment plan is. This is one way to identify areas they may not understand.
4. If you think a cultural factor is at play, ask the patient outright about it and then discuss. Treat all concerns seriously. ☺

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