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Guidelines for Health Care Providers When Dealing with Muslim Patients

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With the growing population of American Muslims, it is likely physicians and chaplains associated with hospitals and hospices may more frequently encounter Muslim patients who may have terminal illnesses, either acute (accident or operation) or chronic (cancer), or other conditions requiring hospitalization. They need to know the beliefs of their Muslim patients in order to provide optimal care for them.

The fundamental belief of Muslims is the oneness of Allāh (God) and belief in Muḥammad as the last Prophet of God. Islam means the submission and obedience to the will of God and aims at achieving peace with self and the surroundings.

In addition to delivery of health care, health care providers' additional roles are: 1) to understand the concerns of the patient and his family and to transmit these concerns to all those involved in the decision-making process; 2) to console and comfort the patient and his family so that they can accept their or their loved one's disease state; and 3) if possible, to take care of the family's needs beyond the medical aspects.

The principles used by the ethicists include preservation of faith; sanctity of life; alleviation of suffering; enjoining what is good and permissible, forbidding what is wrong and prohibited; respecting patients' autonomy, while achieving medical justice without harm; and always being honest and truthful in giving information.

In matters of terminal care, the attending physician should consult the patient, the family, the ethicist, and, preferably, an Islamic scholar before making a final decision.

Muslim patients do not consider illness to be a punishment from God, but that it may bring atonement for their sins. They also know that dying is a part of living, a transformation from one life to another, a part of a journey, and a contract and part of their faith in God. The Qur'ān says,

you were without life and He gave you life; then He will cause you to die and will again bring you to life and again to Him will you return."¹

Thus chaplains and physicians will find the Muslim patients and their families at peace in the illness, calamity and death, affirming their faith, saying,

"...To God we belong and to Him is our return."²

During illness, Muslims seek God's help with patience and prayer, increase the remembrance of God to obtain peace, ask for forgiveness, give more in charity, and read or listen to more of the Qur'ān.

Chaplains and physicians should comfort the terminally ill patient, as they would any other patient, making sure they are pain-free, have their relatives and friends around them, and have access to a Muslim Imam who can read the Qur'ān for them and make special prayers for them. It is also important that funeral and burial arrangements be made in advance in consultation with the family and according to the wishes of the dying patient.

Muslim patients expect their care givers to take care of them as they would for their own relatives, with love, compassion, and understanding.

Some Islamic Health Viewpoints (not necessarily part of direct health care)

- Regard for the sanctity of life is an injunction.
- Blood transfusions are allowed after proper screening.
- Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not permitted.
- Maintaining a terminal patient on artificial life support for a prolonged period in a vegetative state is not encouraged.
- Transplantation in general is allowed with some restrictions. Muslims can receive or donate organs.
- Autopsy is not encouraged. However, it is permitted –

"How can you reject the faith in God, seeing that

with proper consent – if required by law or to determine the final diagnosis, the cause of death, for the sake of knowledge or for investigational purposes.

- Artificial reproductive technology is permitted between husband and wife only during the span of intact marriage.
- Genetic engineering to cure a disease is acceptable. So far, Muslim jurists have called for a ban on human cloning.
- Abortion is not advised except to save the mother's life or in very limited circumstances – in early pregnancy – due to medical or fetal indications. In such situations, one can consult with the Ethics Committee of IMANA.
- While Islam prohibits alcohol and illicit drugs, it does not prohibit Muslim physicians from treating addicts.
- Islam does not prohibit Muslim physicians from caring for AIDS patients or those with other sexually transmitted diseases, even though it opposes all illicit and deviant sexual practices.
- Circumcision of male infants is recommended by Prophet Muḥammad and is practiced.

What the Health Care Providers Can Do for Their Muslim Patients

- Respect their modesty and privacy. Some examinations can be done while a patient wears a gown.
- Always examine a female patient in the presence of another female.
- Although Islam does not ban treatment by the opposite sex, the committee recommends providing the patient with a health care person (MD, RN, etc.) of the same sex, if possible, wherever provider and patient physical contact takes place and especially if the patient feels strongly about it.
- Provide Muslim meals or at least avoid pork, lard, and

alcohol. Allow the family to bring food from home if there are no restrictions.

- Take time to explain tests, procedures, and treatment. Many Muslims are new immigrants and may have a language problem.
- Inform them of their rights as patients and encourage them to have a living will.
- Feel free to discuss with the family the need for autopsy or organ donation.
- Allow the Imam to visit the patients.
- Non-Muslim chaplains may pray for or with Muslim patients using nondenominational prayers.
- Allow the family and Imam to follow Islamic guidelines for preparing the dead body for an Islamic funeral. The dead body should be given the same respect and privacy as during life.
- Identify Muslim patients with the word “Muslim” in the chart, name tag, or bracelet.

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For related information, please visit the IMA Web page (<http://www.imana.org>) or the Islam Web page (<http://www.safaar.com>).

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References

1. Glorious Qur'ān, Chapter 2, Verse 28.
2. Glorious Qur'ān, Chapter 2, Verse 156.