

Care of the Muslim patient

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to assist non-Muslim healthcare professionals to come to a better understanding of Islam so that they can provide appropriate and effective care to their Muslim patients.

After Christians, Muslims form the largest religious group in the world. Islam is the dominant faith in many countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and there are minority Muslim communities throughout the rest of the world. Islam is a universal religion comprising all nationalities of the world, and makes no distinction based on colour, race or ethnicity. One must not confuse ethnic traditions and customs with Islam.

All healthcare providers may have to care for a Muslim patient at some stage. This article presents only a sketchy outline of the religion of Islam, the faith practised by all Muslims. Readers interested in further research should contact the local branch of their State's Islamic Council, or peruse the websites listed in the bibliography at the end of this article.

What is Islam?

Islam means maintaining peace with oneself by submission to the will of God (Islam = "to submit"). Muslims believe that all prophets from Adam to Jesus preached Islam. The preaching was completed by the **Prophet Muhammad** about 600 years after Jesus. Prophet Muhammad is considered the last prophet of Islam, and "the seal" of the prophets.

Allah is the Muslim name for God. Allah is a word used by pre-Islamic peoples in the Middle East, and is still used by Christian Arabs today. The **Qur'an** (Koran) is the Muslim Holy Book. It was revealed in Arabic, and has remained unchanged for 14 centuries. The Qur'an concentrates on the belief in one god (monotheism), Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet, and life after death. It spells out the relationship

between Allah and human beings and provides guidelines for human conduct at all times. The Muslim place of worship is the **Masjid** (mosque). Islam places the onus of practising religion on the individual. There is no compulsion on anyone to profess the Islamic faith, and it is entirely up to the individual to adhere to the tenets of Islam.

There are over one billion Muslims across the globe, with Australian Muslims coming from more than 67 different countries. Most, but not all, Arabs are Muslims, and Arab Muslims constitute only about 20% of the world's Muslim population. According to the 1996 Australian Census, Muslims make the largest religious group in Australia after Christians, making up 1.13% of the Australian population. More than 33% of Australian Muslims were born in Australia, with 12% of Muslims having University degrees — higher than the national average.

Muslims have had a long association with Australia, with Muslim fishermen from Indonesia having interaction with the Indigenous Australians before European discovery of the continent. In the 18th and 19th century, Afghan cameleers played a crucial role in colonial exploration and development. The reliability of the Afghans and their camels was indispensable in the building of the overland telegraph line and the railway (known as the "Ghan") from Port Augusta to Alice Springs.

Islam is a religion of peace, mercy and forgiveness, and most Muslims have nothing to do with the terrorism which has come to be associated with the faith. A Muslim is a person who submits to the Will of Allah. Islam, as outlined in the Qur'an (Allah's words) and the Sunnah (the practice of Prophet Muhammad), consists of seven articles of faith and five fundamental pillars.

Seven articles of Islamic faith

Allah is God Almighty.

Angels are spiritual beings created by Allah that obey his will.

Books: The Psalms of David, Book of Moses (Torah), Bible and Qu'ran are all books of God. The Qu'ran is the final, complete and incorruptible book of God.

Prophets: There is a chain of prophets starting with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus and Muhammad. God's final message to man, a reconfirmation of the eternal message and a summing-up of all that has gone before, was revealed to Prophet Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel. Muslims respect and revere Jesus as a prophet of God, and consider him one of the greatest of Allah's messengers to mankind. Adam, the first Prophet, was



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the father of all mankind, and so there is no justification for racial prejudice, social injustice or second-class citizenship.

Last day: Muslims believe that there will be a last day when all the dead are resurrected and all the souls are judged by Allah.

Fate: Allah created everything with foreknowledge of its fate. The decree of what is Good and what is Evil has been predestined by God.

Life after death: After death, the good will live in heaven with Allah, while the evil are punished in hell.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The Shahadha or Declaration: Belief in One God and in Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger of God. One becomes a Muslim by saying and believing the *Shahadha*.

Salaah or prayers: There are five obligatory daily prayers, which are fixed sets of standing, bowings, prostrations and sittings in worship of Allah. Prayers consist of recitation in Arabic of prescribed texts at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. The direction of these prayers is the Kaaba in Mecca (eg, west-north-west from Melbourne). It is necessary to be in a state of cleanliness or ablution (*Wudhu*) which means that the person and place of prayer must be free of all impurities before one can perform the *Salaah*. A person performing the *Salaah* must not be disturbed. No-one should come in front of people at prayer, or attempt to talk to them. Prayers are often performed on a special prayer mat, but a clean sheet or towel will suffice.

Ramadan was the month in which the Qu'ran was revealed to Muhammad, and so Muslims dedicate *Ramadan* to fasting and spiritual concerns. *Ramadan* is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, which is based on the lunar cycle and does not correspond with the Western calendar. In 2002, *Ramadan* fell over December. Fasting in *Ramadan* (from an hour before sunrise until sunset) is compulsory for all healthy, adult Muslims on reaching puberty. It is a total fast, with abstinence from food, drink, foul language and sexual relations. Exempted from fasting are pregnant, lactating or menstruating women, the sick and travellers. Those people who miss the fast make up for it when they are able.

Zakaat: *Zakaat* is the compulsory annual excise of 2.5% of accumulated wealth. This levy is used entirely for the needy.

Hajj: The great pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, the *Hajj*, is something that every Muslim must try to do at least once in life.

Food, alcohol, halal v haram

Islam relates to all aspects of life. Consumption and use of daily necessities are bounded by Islamic law, as revealed by the Qur'an. Pig meat and all its products (eg, ham, bacon) are forbidden to Muslims, together with wild animals that use their claws or teeth to kill their prey, animals that are not

slaughtered properly, alcohol, tobacco and other intoxicants. These items are considered *haram*, or forbidden.

Halal signifies food that can be consumed, and which has been prepared according to Islamic law. For meats, this involves the reciting of a prayer to Allah during the slaughter, in remembrance that the animal is a creature of God. The purpose of invoking God's name is to reinforce that the animal is being killed only for human sustenance, and that the animal be blessed. This is similar to the Jewish Kosher food ritual. Muslims are allowed to eat all seafood and dairy products.

To cater for *halal* food consumers, food packaging is now increasingly making the Muslim consumer aware of the product's *halal* status.

Not only food and beverages fall within the categories of *halal* and *haram*. Products such as toothpaste, shampoo, cosmetics, soaps, detergents, and deodorants also need to be considered, since *haram* products may have been used in the production process. Individual Muslims vary in how strictly they adhere to rules of *halal* and *haram*.

Aspects of general care

Good communication and open dialogue is the key to providing culturally sensitive care.

If possible, healthcare should be given by people of the same sex as the patient. This has become more possible with the advent of more males in nursing, and more females in medicine. For female patients, there is an overriding objective of modesty and privacy. In some cases, a close family member of the same sex may assist in the washing of the sick person.

Muslims generally wear clothing that does not reveal the shape of their bodies. Hospital attire should be provided that meets these requirements, or if not, the patient can be advised to bring some of their own appropriate clothing.

Unnecessary touching between non-related people of the opposite sex should be avoided. The left hand is considered unclean, so it is preferred that the right hand be used for feeding or administering medications.

A beard is considered a very important religious symbol to the Muslim male patient. Like any other patient, permission must be obtained to shave any part of the beard, which should be done by a man.

A sick Muslim patient who does not have freedom of movement may perform prayers while seated or even while lying down. Healthcare providers should be aware of this and not disturb the patient at prayer.

Muslim patients may require special or additional assistance after toilet duties. It is of utmost importance that patients are given the necessary assistance to clean themselves after clearing their bowels (even in a pan). Having a jug in the bathroom/toilet is greatly appreciated, as Muslims prefer to wash with running water after using the toilet.

The holy day for Muslims is Friday, when a patient may receive a number of hospital visitors above that normally expected.

Birth and the Muslim patient

Muslims consider that a fetus after the age of 120 days is a viable baby. A miscarriage or an intra-uterine death occurring 120 days after conception requires a burial. Therefore, fetuses from such events must be given to the parents for proper burial. Abortion is permitted if the pregnancy threatens the mother's life.

After the birth of a child, some Muslim parents prefer to take the placenta for burial.

It is important for a newborn child to have a prayer call recited in each ear soon after birth. It is possible that the parents may want a learned person (an Imam, Mufti or Sheik) to perform this task.

It is a traditional religious observance to shave the head of newborn babies on the seventh day after birth, or thereabouts.

Circumcision is performed on all male children. The timing of this varies, but it must be done before puberty. The practice of female genital mutilation by some Muslims from African countries, Asia and the Middle East is not supported by the Islamic faith. It is illegal under Australian law, and has no basis in religion.

Death, dying and the Muslim patient

Death is seen as something predestined by God. It is only the beginning of eternal life. The more pious families may thus appear inappropriately calm and accepting by Western standards. In Islam, grieving is allowed for only three days (except that a widow may grieve for 4 months and 10 days).

Because death is perceived as predestined by Allah, Muslims disapprove of any medical care that may hasten the death of a patient, even for humane reasons.

If a patient is in a coma, it is preferred that the patient be turned to face Mecca (in Australia, roughly west-north-west), with the right shoulder also being towards Mecca. It is important for Muslims to recite the Qur'an or prayers in front of the patient or in a room close by.

For a patient who has just died, the face and right shoulder of the deceased should be turned in the direction of Mecca. The whole body of the deceased must be covered by a sheet and should be handled as little as possible. The body must be handled with the utmost respect only by a person of the same sex. A cross must never be placed on the body. The body should not be washed, as this will be done as part of a special religious ritual before burial. Muslim burials are performed as soon as possible after death, sometimes on the same day. The eyes should be closed; the lower jaw should be bandaged to the head to stop a gaping mouth. The body is then straightened and the feet are tied together.

Blood and organ donation

Muslims accept blood transfusions and transplants of various human organs. It is acceptable for Muslims to donate blood and organs, as the saving of life is considered an act of great virtue.

Conclusion

A holistic approach to care recognises that spirituality and health are intertwined for most patients. To be able to perform an accurate assessment and provide competent and sensitive care, the health care practitioner must consider the patient's religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as cultural mores.

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