



## HINDU

MCHC  
Metropolitan Chicago  
Healthcare Council

222 South Riverside Plaza  
Chicago, Illinois 60606-6010  
Telephone (312) 906-6000  
Facsimile (312) 803-0661  
TDD (312) 906-6185

CPWR  
Council for a Parliament of the  
World's Religions

70 East Lake Street, Suite 205  
Chicago, Illinois 60601  
Telephone (312) 629-2990  
Facsimile (312) 629-2291

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# GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS INTERACTING WITH PATIENTS OF THE HINDU RELIGION AND THEIR FAMILIES

## **BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION**

Health care providers need to have an understanding of and appreciation for the beliefs and religious preferences of their Hindu patients in order to provide optimal care for them. As the population of American Hindus increases, physicians, nurses, and chaplains associated with hospitals and hospices will more frequently encounter Hindu patients who require contact with the health care system including those with terminal conditions, either acute or chronic. The information in this document is applicable to all communities of Hindus.

Hinduism is the third largest religion with more than 764,797,000 followers around the world. Approximately 1,285,000 live in the United States with about 80,000<sup>1</sup> in the greater Chicago area. The majority of Hindus are from India; however, Hindus may also come from Trinidad and Africa.

Most Hindus in America are well-educated professionals who originally came as students. Many are doctors, engineers, or businessmen. There is now a second generation of Hindus who have grown up in America.

The major scriptures of Hinduism are the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

## **RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

Hinduism teaches that there is one ultimate reality behind the universe, *Brahman*. This reality is manifested in the universe as various gods and goddesses, who are worshiped as forms of *Brahman*.

*Vedanta* is one of the six major philosophies of Hinduism. *Vedanta* teaches that man's real nature is divine, and that the aim of human life is to realize divinity through selfless work, devotion to God, control of the inner forces, and discrimination between the real and the unreal. It recognizes that Truth is one and accepts all religions, properly understood, as valid means of realizing the truth.

Religion is a way of life rather than a set of dogmas, and *Vedanta* places great importance on actually experiencing the truth for ourselves. Through spiritual practice Hindus try to establish contact with the divine reality and then manifest that divinity in all their actions. *Vedanta* teaches four broad paths that appeal to the different aspects of one's personality:

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<sup>1</sup> National Conference for Community and Justice, 2002

- **Intellect:** Through study, deep thought and analysis of one's own nature, one tries to discover what they really are.
- **Heart:** Through love and surrender to God, one attempts to become united with Him.
- **Mind:** Through concentration and meditation, one attempts to bring one's mind under control and discover the truth which is beyond the mind.
- **Will:** Through unselfish work, one attempts to expand the heart to include all beings.

According to one's nature, an individual will use one or more of these paths to go beyond the ego and experience the highest spiritual truth.

There are two main types of worship in Hinduism. A simple form is the *Arati*, in which fire and other items are waved in front of the deity, which is usually a picture or symbol of one of the gods or goddesses. A more elaborate form of worship is the *Puja*, in which fruit, flowers and other ingredients are offered to the deity. Fire may also be used as a symbol of God.<sup>2</sup>

### **CULTURE AND CELEBRATIONS**

Hindus observances are as follows (all are based on a lunar calendar):

- **Swami Vivekananda Jayanti**– celebrates the birth of *Swami Vivekananda* the founder of the Ramakrishna Order of India, the monastic order of monks. *Swami Vivekananda* was the first Hindu monk to teach *Vedanta* in the West, beginning at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.
- **Maha Shivaratri** – A night devoted to the worship of *Shiva* with vigil and fasting.
- **Sri Ramakrishna Jayanti** – Celebrates the birth of *Sri Ramakrishna*, the teacher of *Swami Vivekananda*.
- **Holi** – A popular festival where people throw colored powder or spray colored water to celebrate episodes in the life of *Sri Krishna*.
- **Ramnavami** – A nine-day celebration in honor of the birth of *Rama*. Stories from the life of *Rama* are narrated and religious dances (*Ramalila*) depicting scenes from his life are performed.
- **Hanuman Jayanti** – Celebrates the birth of *Hanuman* the monkey, *Rama's* faithful servant.
- **Narali Purnima or Rakhi** – A celebration marking the end of the monsoon by throwing coconuts into the ocean as an offering to *Varuna*, the sea god. Girls also tie amulets around their brother's wrists for good luck.
- **Krishna Janmashtami** – Celebrates the birth of *Krishna*. Hindus listen to sacred stories and perform worship of *Krishna*.
- **Ganesh Chaturthi** – Celebrates the birth of *Ganesh*, the remover of obstacles and bringer of luck.
- **Navaratra** – A nine-day celebration devoted to *Durga*, the Divine Mother. During this period, the Divine Mother is worshiped through fasting and prayer.
- **Dashara or Vijaya Sashami** – Celebrates the triumph of the Divine Mother over evil. It also commemorates *Rama's* victory over the demon *Ravana*. *Vijaya* greetings are sent to friends and relatives.
- **Diwali** – One of the most popular Hindu festivals. *Diwali* means "cluster of lights" and is celebrated by setting up large numbers of lights. It commemorates the coronation of *Sri Rama* and is also associated with the name of King *Vikrama*. Sweets and presents are exchanged, and it is a time for getting everything clean and in good shape.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

### **BELIEFS RELATED TO HEALTH CARE**

Hindus believe the body is a vehicle for the soul through which it can experience the world and progress in its journey to God. When the body has served its purpose, it is discarded and the soul takes on another body until it finds union with God. Although Hindus believe in preserving the body until its natural end, they recognize that death is a part of life, and that the true self is immortal and does not die when the body dies.

### **GENERAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES MAY VARY)**

- Human life is considered the highest form.
- Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not encouraged.
- Blood transfusions are allowed.
- Maintaining a terminal patient on artificial life support for a prolonged period in a vegetative state is not encouraged.
- Organ transplantation, both donating and receiving, is allowed.
- Autopsy is permitted.
- Abortion is not advised except for medical indications.
- Male infants are not circumcised.
- Genetic engineering to cure disease is acceptable.

### **MEDICAL & NURSING CARE**

An essential aspect of health care is the health care providers' roles in understanding the concerns of the patient and family and communicating these concerns to all those involved in the decision-making process; to console and comfort the patient and his/her family so that they can accept their or their loved one's diseased state; and if possible, to take care of the family's needs beyond the medical aspects.

The principles used by the ethicists include preservation of the patient's faith; sanctity of life; alleviation of suffering; respect for the patient's autonomy, while achieving best medical treatment without harm, and always being honest and truthful in giving information.

Important aspects in care for Hindu patients include:

- Consult the individual regarding their preferences. Customs may vary from one region of India to another.
- Most Hindus in America speak English well, but some, especially older women, may not be comfortable with English.

- Most hospitals have some Hindus on staff. It would be helpful for them to visit the patient, especially in the case of non-Americanized Hindus.
- Respect modesty and privacy. Women may want to be examined by a doctor of the same sex.
- Explain procedures to patient and their family.
- Many Hindus feel that Western medicine tends to overmedicate the patient, especially in the use of antibiotics, and they may be hesitant to start aggressive treatment. Hindus also may want to use alternative medicine such as Ayurveda and homeopathy.
- Hindus tend to have close extended families and an active social life and may have many visitors. Family members prefer to be involved in the patient's care.
- Some visitors may take off their shoes before entering the room. It is a common custom to take off your shoes before entering an Indian home.
- Many Hindu women wear a red dot on their forehead. This means they are married. Indian women may wear other signs of marriage, such as a necklace, bracelets, or toe-rings, which they may not want to remove. If jewelry must be removed, it should be explained to the patient. The hospital's policy on handling valuables should be followed.
- Some men may wear the sacred thread, which is at the Upanayna ceremony when a boy is 12-13. The sacred thread is supposed to be worn at all times. Consult with the patient about the removal of the sacred thread.
- Religious Hindus may want to keep a picture, book, or prayer beads in their room. They may also want to hear devotional music on their tape recorder.
- For domestic violence against Hindu patients in the Chicago Metropolitan area, you may contact Apna Ghar (773) 334-4663.

### **SPIRITUAL CARE/PRAYERS**

- There is no expectation that there will be a visit by Hindu clergy.
- A Prayer room for Hindus may be provided. The room should be quiet, clean, and carpeted. An Inter-religious space sensitive to the needs of persons of diverse traditions is acceptable.
- Copies of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu scriptures should be available.
- If possible, establish a relationship with a local Hindu Temple to serve as a religious resource.
- Identify one or more Hindu physicians or other healthcare providers on your staff who can act as liaisons with Hindu patients.

- If congregational Hindu prayers are being held at the institution, inform other Hindu patients.
- Inform individuals of their rights as patients and encourage them to have advance directives.

### **DIET/FOOD PREFERENCE & PRACTICES**

- Many Hindus are strict vegetarians. Most Hindus do not eat beef or beef products, such as jello. Very orthodox Hindus may also avoid onions, garlic, etc. Consult with the patient about their dietary practices.
- Allow patients to bring food from home if there are no dietary restrictions.
- Some Hindus may practice fasting on certain days. Generally, a sick person can be excused from fasting, but consult the individual.

### **END OF LIFE CARE**

- In matters of terminal care, the attending physician should consult the patient and his/her family before making a final decision.
- Health care providers (including nurses, physicians and chaplains) should comfort the terminally ill patient, making sure he/she is pain-free and has his/her relatives and friends nearby.
- Family members usually prefer to be involved in the patient's care.
- Hindus, because of their religious belief, are more acceptable of natural death, and hence not in favour of artificially prolonging life.
- Terminally ill patients may prefer to stay at home with family.
- It is important that funeral and burial arrangements be made in advance in consultation with the family and according to the wishes of the dying or deceased patient, if possible.
- Hindus practice cremation. Cremation should take place shortly after death, preferably within 24 hours. It is important that the Death Certificate be filled out quickly so that funeral arrangements can be completed.
- For end of life care facilities you can contact the National Hospice Association at (800) 338-8619 or <http://www.hospiceinfo.org>

### **RESOURCES/REFERENCES**

Hinduism and Medicine—A Guide For Medical Professionals:

<http://www.angelfire.com/az/ambersukumaran/medicine.html>

Vivekananda Vedanta Society web page: <http://www.vedantasociety-chicago.org>

Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago web page: <http://www.ramatemple.org>

**Social Services:**

Indo-American Center (773) 973-4444

Asian Human Services (773) 728-2235

**Additional Information:**

Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (312) 629-2990

Vivekananda Vedanta Society (773) 363-0027

Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago (630) 972-0300

National Conference for Community and Justice (312) 236-9272, [www.nccj-chicago.org](http://www.nccj-chicago.org)

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