



NATIVE AMERICAN

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GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS INTERACTING WITH AMERICAN INDIAN (NATIVE AMERICAN; FIRST NATION) PATIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

Health care providers need to have an understanding of and respect for a wide spectrum of beliefs and religious preferences of their Native American patients in order to provide optimal care for them. As the population of Native American increases, health care workers including physicians, nurses and chaplains will more frequently encounter Native American patients who require contact with the health care system. The information in this document is general and is applicable to all communities of Native Americans. In the United States, there are more than 500 nations of Native Americans, each having their own separate customs, language, culture, set of beliefs and religious practices. There is no single “Native American Religion”, or church hierarchy. There is no central figure like Moses, Jesus, Muhammad or Buddha, nor is there a central holy book in Native American Religious tradition. It is an oral tradition that is passed down from generation to generation, based on certain guiding principles that are internalized from childhood and are an integrated part of each person’s life. Following the sacred way does not separate life into segments, it is seen as one.

There are two and half million Native Americans living in the United States and Canada with over 100,000 residing in the metropolitan Chicago area. There are many Native Americans who follow traditional customs and spiritual beliefs. There are also many Native Americans who combine their traditional set of beliefs and religious practices within the framework of Christianity and would want both traditional and Christian religious traditions while in the hospital. Chief Seattle said, *“Our religion is the tradition of our ancestors—the dreams of our old men and women, given them in the solemn hours of the night by the Great Spirit, and the visions of our tribal chiefs—and is within the heart of our people”.*

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

There are many ways of expressing ones spiritual beliefs and they vary widely from region to region and from Nation to Nation however there are certain basic concepts or ideas that do occur in most Native American Religions.

- The Great Spirit, Great Mystery, Great Mysterious (Wakan Tanka {Lakota}, Gitchi Manitou {Algonquin}, Orenda {Iroquois}, Maheo {Cheyenne}, Taiowa {Hopi}, Tam Apo {Shosone}, Ussen {Apache} among other names) is a great power that is a part of all creation—in the wind, the water, the plants, the trees, the animals, the stones, in the sky, friends and strangers. This power cannot be imagined in a human form for it is a universal energy that is attuned to all of nature (plants, animals, earth, and humanity). All of nature, including human nature, is the Creation of this great power. The Great Spirit informs all of life and the traditions and rituals are meant to connect humans with that power. The Great Spirit

cannot be seen or touched; it is present in the cycles of life such as the continuing change of seasons, day and night, growth and death, movement of sun, moon and stars. Most Native Americans whether they keep traditional (i.e. old customs and spiritual beliefs) or more modern (United Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, etc.) do share the common belief that there is one Creator of the heavens and earth and that all parts of creation (plants, animals, and humans) are created equal. This is emphasized further by the equal respect given to all parts of creation. Native Americans also believe that our Creator is never punishing or mean, but is a loving and just Creator. The Great Spirit is full of a joyous, wondrous and magnificent love that encircles all that desire.

- The Creator's Spirit is alive and in all things in the universe. Everything that can be seen or touched is "alive" with the spirit, or breath. The Creator's Spirit actively affects human lives in ways that can be both good and bad. Mother or Grandmother Earth's spirit nourishes and sustains life, and it is there that people return after death. Mother or Grandmother Earth is to be respected and given thanks for the life it gives to sustain creation. All forms of life depend on all others. The words Mitakuye' Oyasin expresses this thought which means all of creation are my relatives, we are all one, *"we are all connected and whatever happens to the Earth it will happen to the children of the Earth."* (Chief Seattle). Lakota Holy Man Black Elk states, *"Peace...comes within the souls of men and women when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the Universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells Wakan Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere. It is within each of us."*
- Each individual is called to "walk in the sacred way or to walk in beauty". This means to live in balance and harmony with the universe and spirit world. Each person finds their own sacred way by seeking the sacred through traditional teachings, prayer, vision quests and or dreams.
- Morals, ethics, values, beliefs, culture, customs, religious and sacred traditions are passed on through an oral tradition and through ceremonies. Cultural identity, understanding and bonding takes place through rituals developed by tribes over many centuries. Some of these may include dancing, singing, drumming, prayer, worship, feasting, purification rites, fasting and physical ordeals. An example of this would be a singer coming to the hospital with a hand drum in order to sing a prayer song.
- There are medicine men and women, singers, shamans, and healers who have been given a special gift by the Great Spirit to help mediate between the spirit world and the earthly world for healing, spiritual renewal and for the good of the community.
- Humor is an important part of the sacred way because two-leggeds (people) need to be reminded of their own foolishness.
- The theme of "One Mind" is one that runs through many Native American tribes.
- Decisions will be put off if agreement cannot be reached. Dissention will dictate that one needs to proceed with caution and take time to reflect in order for everyone to come to "one mind", "one accord" and/or "one decision".
- Community and relationships are important. Family includes many extended family members and friends and/or an entire clan. Elders are respected and listened to when decisions are being made.

- Balance is an important concept. Illness occurs when life is out of balance. “Koyaanisquatsi”—life is out of balance.

BELIEFS RELATED TO HEALTH CARE

Health, for the individual Native American and/or the tribe or family, depends on proper actions and interactions with the spirit world. Well-being or wholeness comes about through walking in harmony with the forces of nature and the universe. Illness is a sign of having fallen out of step with those forces thus causing disharmony in spirit, mind and body. The most important element, the essence of our being, is the individual's spirit and for wellness to occur the spirit must be considered. For this reason, a Native American with a broken leg, for example, may seek treatment not only from a physician to care for the physical injury but also from a medicine man or woman to care properly for the spirit. C. Locust in the article “Wounding the Spirit: Discrimination and traditional American Indian belief systems” states: *“Treating the spirit is the process of finding out why the broken leg occurred, understanding the event in a spiritual rather than a physical sense, and then beginning the process of changing whatever it was in the body, mind, or spirit that was out of harmony enough to warrant a broken leg.”*

Many traditional Native Americans believe that illness comes from supernatural forces. Examples are: the Cherokee believe animal spirits bring illness when hunters do not pay proper respect; other tribes believe illness is caused through an individual's bad actions; Iroquois believe illness is caused by unfulfilled desires and dreams; Inuit believe illness can be the result of sins committed by ancestors; and others believe illness occurs through contact with evil spirits. Serious illness may be the result of “soul loss”, in which evil spirits, especially those of the dead, capture the sick person's soul when it is out of his or her body during sleep. A diagnosis of soul loss denotes critical illness. This patient may have a wasting disease, be delirious, unconscious, or in a coma. Curing takes place through rituals that restore the sick person to balance and harmony. Health and healing are built on the foundation of relationship and the interconnectedness of life.

Native Americans consider healing a sacred calling. If one is called into healing ministry one must use that gift to help others. Native healers use healing places and natural means to cure people during illness. Healing power comes from the natural forces of the earth, which can be reached through the saying of prayers. During times of illness many Native Americans will call upon a medicine man or woman or shaman. In most cases the medicine person is also considered a holy person because it is the belief that they do all of their healing with the Creator's help and guidance. Many Native Americans today will call upon both modern medicine and traditional healing ceremonies to achieve wellness.

GENERAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES MAY VARY)

To Walk in Beauty, a concept from the Navajo tradition is an important phrase. It is included in prayers as well as using it as an honored phrase in parting. It does not mean that you should see beautiful things around you. Beauty means to live in balance. This balance includes a circle containing our parts – body, mind, heart and soul. Another circle of Beauty would be community, family, plants and animal, brother & sisters. And yet another circle includes earth (mineral) air, water and fire. There must be a balance...a oneness with all parts, the ones listed above and our traditional spiritual self with the universe. This is a must. Picture a perfectly weighted mobile. That will represent all parts walking in beauty. Now place a weight on one of the strings. The mobile is out of balance. This could represent our lives during an illness or crisis. The doctor may remove or fix that problem. But still we shake as the mobile does. We need the spiritual person to make everything right to restore the oneness with all so we may Walk in Beauty again.

- Most Nations allow blood transfusions. In general, Navajos do not.
- Organ transplantation, both donating and receiving, is generally allowed. There is a special effort to get Native Americans to sign up as donors due to difficulty in matching tissue. In general, Navajos do not allow organ donation.
- Circumcision of male infants is infrequent.
- Sanctity of life is a high value but abortion practices vary.
- Maintaining a terminal patient on artificial life support for a prolonged period in a vegetative state is not encouraged. At the end of life, prayers may be said and family is encouraged to be present.
- Autopsy is not encouraged among traditional people. However, it is permitted if required by law. Modern families may desire autopsy for health care information.

MEDICAL & NURSING CARE

Respecting Traditions

- Greet with a gentle handshake. Do not look straight in the eyes, especially Elders. Hugs and touching are rarely done. Do not initiate.
- At the time of admission ask the person about their tradition and do not be in a hurry. Listen to the patient as they explain about their tradition and their needs. Look for ways to be sensitized to their beliefs.
- For those who speak their traditional language, ask if they need a translator.
- Native Americans are a modest people. Try to be sure their bodies are not exposed to others.
- When possible, provide male doctors and nurses for male patients and female doctors and nurses for female patients.
- Show respect for all family members. Treat all with kindness.
- In most native societies “intelligence” is measured by one’s ability to listen and hear and understand rather than one’s ability to ask “smart” questions. Do not interrupt...your question may well be answered if you listen. If someone shares personal stories etc. with you – they are for you and you alone. Do not speak about these to others.
- Many people have items that they consider sacred. They may be stones, feathers, antlers, fur, claws, or pouches of cloth or leather. Do not touch sacred items. In an emergency, keep sacred items with the patient when at all possible.
- A woman’s moon time (menstrual cycle) is considered an important time of power. A woman may not participate in some ceremonies “on her moon.”
- When a family is having a ceremony performed – leave the room and provide privacy unless the family asks you to stay. Providing a room for ceremonial purposes would be helpful and afford families with their needed privacy.
- Ask permission before taking any photographs. If taking X-Rays, CT-Scans, MRI’s or any other type of imagery take time and explain the procedure.
- If the person is in need of an amputation of a body part, ask what their tradition is and what they may require afterwards for the body part that is removed. Some may request that the body part be blessed and then followed by cremation in order to be buried with them at the time of death or they may need it to be buried soon after the surgery if the body part is not being cremated.

Pain Management

- Patients may deny their pain, or decide not to talk about it because it is hard to accept that their bodies are failing them.
- Patients may also be afraid of becoming addicted or be sensitive to medicines. Take time to explain healing can be quickened if pain is managed.
- Talk with the patient to find out their preference for managing their pain; pain management can be managed at the hospital and/or at home.
- If the patient is dying they may want to go to the Creator with a clear and open mind.
- Patients may not believe in medication due to their belief that the Creator will heal them through traditional healing practices.

Care of The Elderly

Elders are respected and treated with honor within the Native American society. They are respected as teachers, the purveyors of tribal history and lore, and for their advice. They are seen as people who have a great amount of wisdom and knowledge, which they share with others of all ages. Their presence is not taken for granted or just tolerated but relished and enjoyed. This is a natural part in all Societies. The Native Americans take this special attitude and use it to its fullest extent. Caring for the elderly in their homes is seen as important and as a necessary part of life. The children are then given a gift of wisdom, love and the freedom to play and dream with a person who does not care how foolish they act for only they can see how wonderful and sometimes short life can be. Children and Elders are supposed to be together. It is through our Elders that individuals are taught the full circle of life, which includes death.

If the patient needs care at home after being in the hospital, family members should be trained to take care of the patient. Time should be taken to explain the procedures, utilizing hands-on experience in order for the family member to make sure they fully understand the process.

SPIRITUAL CARE/PRAYERS

Sacred Objects/Healing Rituals

A Medicine bundle, medicine bag is a collection of objects with sacred meaning and spirit power, which is wrapped in an animal skin or in a cloth. All of the items are in some way connected to the creation; these items may include shells, stones, crystals, feathers, and/or tobacco. The medicine bundle/bag may belong to an individual, the family or it may be the sacred object of a tribe or clan. These bundles are to be treated with great respect. If given a bundle for safekeeping it is both a great honor and a grave responsibility.

Other sacred objects from tribes have significant spiritual significance. Examples of these are: the sacred pipe of the Lakota; the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest prepare paho, sacred prayer sticks that are carved and decorated with stones, shells, and feather; the Huron and Hopi use masks and these are worn in sacred dances; tobacco, sage, sweet grass for purification; feathers and medicine wheel for lifting up of prayers; and medicinal plants and herbs are gifts from the spirit world to be used in healing. There are over 400 species of wild plants, which can be used for medicinal use.

Smudging with sage, cedar, and sweet grass may be desired. To smudge is to spread the smoke of burning herbs over a person, space, or object for purification. The smoke carries prayers to Creator. This ceremony usually involves a feather or fan. If smoke is not allowed, smudging the oils for sage, cedar and sweet grass may be used as a substitute.

Tobacco ties are small cloth bundles that contain tobacco, which can be given as a sign of friendship, tied on a string, or tied on a branch to carry prayers. The making of these prayer ties is an act of prayer.

Feather ceremonies might involve the sweeping of a person or body with feathers, the tying on of feathers, or the handling of feathers in prayer.

Face painting may be a part of a ceremony to prepare a person for surgery or death, or may be a part of the care of the body after death.

Healing herbs, oils, roots are often used for spiritual and emotional healing as well as a part of the treatment of the physical condition. Physicians are encouraged to consult with the Native American practitioner to integrate these treatments.

Fetishes are objects representing the power of animal spirits, which can assist in healing. Many persons find special strength from a particular animal or their "totem."

Pipe ceremony may be performed by a spiritual leader either in the hospital or outside on behalf of the patient. When possible, arrangements should be made for the pipe to be smoked with the patient. If the patient can be moved out of doors this is preferable. When conditions do not allow smoke near a patient, the spiritual leader may have the patient pray with the tobacco and the pipe before going to smoke it elsewhere.

Chantways and songs with drum or rattle are a daily part of healing for many Native Americans. The visit by tribal singers is emotionally very healing for the patient. A patient may have an audiotape of a prayer song they will want to hear regularly. The drum represents the heartbeat of mother earth. The sound of the heartbeat is the first sound that people hear when he or she is in their mother's womb. The shaker or rattle is associated with medicine ceremonies. When patients are in coma or near death, hearing is often the one sense that remains. The sound of the drum or shaker is associated with healing prayers and will reassure the patient that they are not alone, nor forgotten.

Medicine lodge or inipi lodge is a purification ceremony that takes place in a special "sweat lodge." It involves prayers and the calling of spiritual ancestors for help. This ceremony may be requested before a medical treatment such as surgery. If the patient is unable to participate, the spiritual leader may perform this ceremony on their behalf.

Crystals and sacred stones may be used as part of healing. Crystals may be laid on a person's body, or may be held for prayer. Sometimes a crystal is prayed with in the four directions in place of the pipe. Sacred stones may be held in prayer.

DIET/FOOD PREFERENCE & PRACTICES

Fasting is a traditional part of preparation for rite of passage ceremonies and for spiritual discernment. Although a person who is ill should be encouraged to eat, family members and others may be fasting on behalf of the person. Sometimes fasting is a part of body healing, as a cleansing of toxins.

Native Americans have preference for certain traditional foods during ceremonial times. These may be requested, especially particular teas. When preparing a special diet, (such as for diabetics or heart conditions), utilize traditional food recipes and then adapt or change recipes to fit the dietary requirements.

BEGINNING OF LIFE CARE

As children come into this world it is recognized that this is the beginning of the cycle of life. Throughout the child's life each will go through the cycle of life, such as: birth, naming, childhood, adolescence, marriage, child rearing, old age, and death. All stages of life are valuable. There are a vast number of rituals that mark the passages from one stage of life to another help to keep the individual on the path and to bind them to their family and their community. The path of life is a spiritual journey, not just a physical one. The ceremonies marking life's passages vary widely from tribe to tribe, however most groups value each stage of life and mark it with ritual and celebration. At the beginning of life there are a variety of traditions and these may include:

- The use of herbs and teas during labor.
- The help of a midwife.
- The presence of family members, spiritual leaders.
- The saving of a length of the umbilical cord, which is then added to a sacred bundle. This bundle is kept by the child for a lifetime as a connection to the mother and to mother earth.
- Saving of the placenta.
- Singing a special song to the child at time of birth.
- Burning incense and smudging the newborn.

END OF LIFE CARE

Native Americans do believe that death is natural and necessary in the circle of life. They may vary the beliefs as to how long it may take for ones souls to travel from ones body here on earth to the final joyous reunion with our Creator. There may also be various beliefs as to what if any objects are needed to make ones Spirit journey and what needs to be done to the body left behind.

A patient who is nearing death often reports visits and conversations with deceased relatives. Usually the patient will request traditional foods and it is very important that the family obtain these foods for the patient so that they are ready for their journey. Native Americans use food to honor the dying and deceased where other people may use flowers. Patients may also request special prayers from their tradition and if they are Christian they may also want to have their pastor or priest present.

The body should not be moved until the family has been consulted about their particular tradition. Special clothing may be brought to dress the body in before it leaves the hospital, or the family may request that their loved one be covered at the time of death by a blanket. Particular ceremonial objects may be placed on the body. It is often customary for a family member or the spiritual leader to cut a piece of hair from the deceased. This is for some tribes especially important at the death of a child.

Traditional persons do not generally desire embalming, and may require significant lengths of time to be with the body. Traditional families may wish to have the body near them for as long as 4 days.

It is critical to talk to the family about their particular tribal tradition. For example, Navajo people destroy the clothes and possessions of the dead person and are careful never to speak the person's name because to do so might attract his/her wandering ghost or spirit. On the other hand, some tribes will make special ceremonies of giving away the deceased persons possessions and will repeatedly speak the name of the person after death as part of ceremony.

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