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World's Religions

**ZOROASTRIAN/
ZARATHUSHTI**

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GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS INTERACTING WITH PATIENTS OF THE ZOROASTRIAN/ZARATHUSHTI RELIGION AND THEIR FAMILIES

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

The Zoroastrian/Zarathushti population in the world is small – there are between 200,000 and 250,000 in the world, 20,000 in the United States and approximately 700 in metropolitan Chicago¹. Hence, health care workers are unlikely to have many encounters with these patients and may not be able to recognize one until specifically informed at the point of entry into the system. The majority of Zoroastrians/Zarathushtis are concentrated in India and Iran. Zoroastrians/Zarathushtis may also be identified as *Parsis*.

There are 8 houses of worship (***Darbe Mehrs*** or *house of love/devotion/light*) in the United States and Canada. The Chicago area ***Darbe Mehr*** serves the population of the Midwest and is located in Hinsdale, Illinois.

The scriptures of Zarathushtra are contained in the ancient texts, the ***Avesta***, written in the ***Avestan*** language. Of these, the divine hymns, the ***Gathas***, are the words of Prophet Zarathushtra himself.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Prophet Zarathushtra, or Zoroaster, preached in ancient Persia around 1500 BCE. He preached the monotheistic religion of the One Supreme God, ***Ahura Mazda*** (“Wise Lord”). His message is positive, life affirming, and active-principled. He calls for reason and action. His ethic is based on personal responsibility. Zoroastrianism stresses conscious decisions to choose the righteous path (***Asha***). A Zoroastrian is taught to lead an industrious, honest and charitable life.

Zarathushtra asked his listeners to choose a life of intelligent reflection and active benevolence. Zoroaster’s teachings are embodied in the triad:

- ***Humata*** -- Good Thoughts
- ***Hukhta*** -- Good Words
- ***Huvereshta*** -- Good Deeds

The loftiest ideal for man is to emulate the *Amesha Spentas* or attributes of *Ahura Mazda*, which include the following:

¹ National Conference for Community and Justice, 2001

- **Vohu Manah** is the Good Mind. Zarathushtra declared that man must think for himself before he can believe. He is given the freedom to choose between good and evil and the responsibility to reap the consequences.
- **Asha** is the Divine Law that embodies Righteousness, Truth, Wisdom, Justice and Progress. Every Zoroastrian strives to follow the Path of **Asha** in its highest and deepest spiritual sense.
- **Kshathra** is **Ahura Mazda's** divine majesty and power. As a soldier of God, man actively promotes good and fights evil.
- **Armaity**, the Benevolent Spirit, is **Ahura Mazda's** Purity and Devotion.
- **Haurvatat** (Perfection) and **Ameratat** (Immortality) are the twin rewards of a righteous life.

CULTURE AND CELEBRATIONS

Navjote (Initiation) Ceremony -- Every Zoroastrian child is officially initiated into the faith with the **Navjote ceremony**. He or she is invested with the sacred **Sudreh** and **Kushti**, accompanied with recitation from the **Avesta**. The **Sudreh** is an undershirt of pure white muslin with a small symbolic pocket in front reminding the wearer to fill it every day with Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. The **Kushti**, (a woolen cord that circles the waist 3 times) signifies that the wearer has girded him or herself to practice the teachings of Zarathushtra. The Sudreh and Kushti are worn next to the skin day and night.

Funeral Ceremony -- Zoroastrians regard the soul of the dead more important than the physical remains and extensive prayers for the dead are an integral part of Zoroastrian rituals. In India the body, after due reverence, is placed in the "Towers of Silence," located on hilltops open to the sky and given free access to birds of prey. The bones are bleached and crumble to dust over time. No monument is erected for it is hoped that the departed will live on in the hearts and prayers of their loved ones. In other parts of the world, burial or cremation is the norm.

Zoroastrian rituals and prayers are solemnized in the presence of an **eternal flame**, which is scrupulously tended with sandalwood and frankincense. It is kept burning in a silver urn in the inner sanctum of every Zoroastrian temple. Fire is revered as a visible symbol of the inner light, the inner flame that burns within each person. It is a physical representation of the Illumined Mind, and Light and Truth, all highly regarded in the Zoroastrian doctrine. Despite its pre-historic origins, Zoroastrianism has vehemently denounced object worship in any shape or form.

Zoroastrians do not necessarily have to visit a temple in order to worship -- the universe, **Ahura Mazda's** creation, is their temple. Zoroastrians generally worship at home where they maintain a corner with a burning flame for offering prayers. The devout will recite the **Avesta** five times a day during each of the five watches of the day -- morning at sunrise to mid-day, mid-day to mid-afternoon, mid-afternoon to sunset, sunset to mid-night, and mid-night to breaking of dawn. Recitations are from the **Khordeh-Avesta**, the daily book of prayers written in the ancient **Avestan** language. All of the prayers are reverence for **Ahura Mazda** and His Creation.

Lessons for good living are signified by the three cardinal prayers:

Ashem Vohu to do good for the sake of doing good

Yatha Ahu Vairio to be of service

Yangahé Atam a lesson for good living

Zoroastrians do not ordinarily congregate to worship. Worship is on an individual basis, however there are several festivals when they do come together. The year is divided into six seasonal divisions called **Gahambars**. At the end of each **Gahambar** the community gets together to share a simple meal and offer prayers. A **Jashan** is one of the most important and most commonly performed ceremonies. It is a capsulization of the Zoroastrian doctrine and a reminder of the passage of the soul from the **geti** (this world) to the **minoi** (the next world). After a thanksgiving **Jashan** ceremony, a meal is shared with everyone contributing according to his or her facility.

BELIEFS RELATED TO HEALTH CARE

- The belief in one God, truth for its own sake, responsibility for one's own actions, and words may sometimes translate illness as a result of personal failure or infractions. This feeling of guilt may result in decreased self-worth and interfere with recovery. Hence, prayers and interaction with family and minister (clergy) will play significant role in the recovery process and optimal outcome.
- Traditional patients may wear a white cotton loose shirt (**Sudreh**) next to the skin and a woolen girdle or cord (**Kushti**) circling the waist three times. As much as possible, the staff should allow and even encourage the patients to keep this attire on since this will have a soothing positive feeling for the patient's mind and be helpful in the healing process. Daily changes of the garments are required, so one may be brought from home unless specific reasons to disallow this exist. The garment can be removed for a short period of time for surgery or procedures with understanding and sensitivity and re-worn as soon as possible. Neither the shirt nor the cord should be cut and disposed of nonchalantly. Cutting or destroying may be permitted if no other way exists as in very serious trauma. Sensitivity to this religious attire is specifically important for emergency department staff who may unknowingly and spontaneously proceed to cut and destroy the garment. The garment should alert the staff that the unaccompanied individual is a Zoroastrian. Hospital personnel who may then approach the local Zoroastrian organization for intervention and proper identification of the individual.
- There is no specific religious instruction on organ and tissue donation. Many Zoroastrians in the United States today are inclined towards donation and have expressed desire to donate. The religious practice is that organ and tissue donation should be done as a dying process rather than after death so that the funeral and disposal of the dead body can occur within 24 hours of death. Organ and tissue procurement organizations should be sensitive to this issue and to the religious practices so that swift and quick procurement can be done.
- Final disposal of the dead body is expected as soon as possible and the funeral ceremony is encouraged to occur within six hours (**one gah**) if possible but not longer than 24 hours.
- No religious instruction exists for autopsy. Hence, this is a personal issue with the family. Most families are well educated and astute so that if the necessity and benefit of autopsy is well explained, most will consider the rationale and agree. This should be done as soon after death so that funeral ceremony and disposition can occur within 24 hours.
- There is no religious instruction regarding reproductive issues. Hence, abortion and contraception is a personal decision.

MEDICAL & NURSING CARE

Generally, personal hygiene is of paramount importance, so body fluids and excreta are considered “untouchable” and to be removed (disposed of) immediately. Therefore, a Zoroastrian person demonstrates urgency in this respect and may appear demanding (impatient) to health care staff. A meaningful individual “informed decision” process is encouraged and no religious restrictions are placed by mandates dictated by clergy, though counseling and advice are sought.

All medications are permitted and freely utilized. Attention should be made to medication, nutritional herb supplements brought from home with reference to drug/drug, drug/food interactions/ interference. There is no preference for same-sex care givers.

SPIRITUAL CARE/PRAYERS

It is believed that prayers made/offered in as close a proximity to the sick person as possible are most beneficial, hence, whenever possible, visitors should be permitted for short periods of time (15-30 minutes).

DIET/FOOD PREFERENCE & PRACTICES

Generally there are no religious guidelines hence individual preferences and restrictions (if expressed) may be honored. An institutional diet may be unappetizing and boring to the sick person, hence a traditional item brought from home such as rice with lentil or split pea sauce may be a welcome change, improve morale and assist recovery. In general, Zoroastrians are not vegetarians.

END OF LIFE CARE

In the event of death, prayers at the last breath of life are beneficial. A candle, oil lamp or incense burner lighted by the person’s head is believed to assist the soul leaving the dying body. A small electric table lamp may be substituted if the other natural flames are not available. Prayers (***Ashem Vohu***) should be recited by a family member or friend by the dying or dead person’s bedside.

No special religious space is needed. Grieving relatives may wish to utilize a non-denominational quiet room. Having the ***Sudreh*** and ***Kushti*** worn at the time of death is beneficial to the dying person, hence if not already worn; it should be put on as soon as possible. ***Sudreh*** and ***Kushti*** should be worn by the person after competing post –mortem care.

RESOURCES/REFERENCES

The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA)

www.fezana.org

FEZANA serves as the coordinating body for 23 Zoroastrian Associations in the United States and Canada.

Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago

www.zac-chicago.org

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