



# 12 steps to cultural competency

The following guidelines are intended to help providers work effectively with patients and families who are from other cultures. Integrating these steps into clinical practice will create a better working relationship between patient and provider.

## Integrate these 12 steps into your clinical practice

- 1 Ask questions to determine how the family members interact and how their interactions impact the patient.**

Determine if the family has faced significant illness in the past in order to better understand how the family copes with crises. This discussion will demonstrate your interest in learning more about the patient's culture, and it will help you to develop an effective care and/or discharge plan.
- 2 Identify and consider how long the family has been in the United States.**

This information is key as it can help you understand how much the family has been exposed to and integrated into American healthcare culture. If a family has been here for less than a year or they have not been seeing a provider, it is likely that much of their understanding of and approach to healthcare is closely associated with their country of origin.
- 3 Avoid making an assumption based solely on the patient's country of origin.**

Stereotypes often do not hold true. Cultures and beliefs can vary by regional and demographic differences. Each person should be treated as an individual, and cultural beliefs may differ from one person to the next. Therefore, it is most useful to ask questions of each individual to determine whether there are cultural beliefs or values that may impact their care.
- 4 Be aware that some behaviors are associated with cultural or regional beliefs.**

For example, in some cultures avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect. This should not be interpreted as a sign of indifference.
- 5 If there is something you don't understand about the patient's culture, ask about it.**

As long as questions are posed in a respectful way, patients and families most likely will appreciate the fact that you want to understand their culture.

# 12 steps to cultural competency continued

- 6 Using friends or family members as ad-hoc interpreters is a breach of standard procedures, best practices and duty of care owed to the patient, so please only do so in an emergency.**

It also places your organization at risk because it is impossible to know if the message is being interpreted correctly, and it eliminates the patient's voice and understanding of their own medical diagnosis or treatment. Friends or family members may give their own version of events, which may skew the consultation. It can be difficult to check the veracity of the interpretation, which could lead to a misdiagnosis. Also, it may be uncomfortable for both the patient and the friend or family member to be put in this situation. Therefore, using friends or family for interpreting is discouraged, except in an emergency. Using a trained medical interpreter whenever possible helps ensure accurate, objective interpretation.

- 7 Have your standard operating procedure for obtaining language services available.**

This information should identify the interpretation agency and list pertinent contact information and a list of the languages covered.

- 8 Learning some basic phrases you can use with patients and families such as "hello," "how are you" and "goodbye" in their native language is a great way to build rapport.**

However, please be advised that you should never rely on basic communicative phrases in place of medical interpreters. Knowing enough to "get by" is a neglectful and dangerous practice that may lead to misdiagnosis and places you and your organization at risk.

- 9 Consider researching cultural issues that may affect care management.**

For example, in cultures where women are allowed to make few decisions, a mother may not feel comfortable signing a consent form for pediatric care if the patient's father is present. However, it is important not to make an assumption as this may not apply to every individual or family. Where it is legally acceptable to have either parent sign, it is best to ask for a parental signature and allow the parents to make that decision.

- 10 You may choose to gather resources to further educate yourself.**

Resources are available from local bookstores to internet-based programs.

- 11 Do some research on the behaviors associated with the cultures with which you come in regular contact.**

By doing so you would find out, for example, that people from certain cultures may not disagree with a provider or say "no" outright, as they consider this disrespectful to a person in a position of authority. Rather, if they disagree with something, they may remain silent or nod in agreement. It may not be in their best interest to express concerns or issues they might have. Therefore, using the services of a trained and qualified interpreter may not only assist you in translating language, but also help in navigating cultural differences.

- 12 At all times, treat the patient and family with respect, and show that you care about them.**

No one person is an expert on any culture, and you don't need to be in order to communicate effectively with a patient and family. By demonstrating your interest in their beliefs, especially as they relate to health and wellness, you will build a relationship based on respect and trust.