

Hmong

AND HEALTH CARE

WHO THEY ARE

Hmong consist of a distinctive ethnic group from the uplands of Laos who first arrived in the United States as refugees in 1976. The CIA had recruited the Hmong to assist them during the Vietnam War (1963-75). After the war, the Pathet Lao (Communists) persecuted all US supporters in Laos, especially the Hmong. They were forced to flee from Laos to neighboring countries, such as Thailand, where they lived in refugee camps until they were brought here by the US government. Up until the present time, they continue to arrive in significant numbers. Despite the larger number of Hmong in California, **Minneapolis/St. Paul is the “Hmong capital” of the United States** probably because of density of location.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES¹

Traditionally Hmong are strongly connected with each other. They drop into each others' homes just to say hello and keep in touch. The common bonds they share are reinforced through Hmong language which has non-phonetic Roman script. The language was not written in Laos, so providing translated materials to first generation Hmong may be pointless.

Hmong see pregnancy and childbirth as normal conditions and a matter of personal autonomy, not a pathology requiring medical care. They are considered “women’s business.” As the only male in attendance, the husband is expected to assist in childbirth.

Difficulties in childbirth are traditionally **ascribed** to

- commission of wrong actions toward parents, elders, or husband,
- result of a curse,
- being struck by spirits of women in the husband’s clan who died of childbirth, or

¹Please see Introduction for a caveat against stereotyping members of any group at all.

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

- capture by malignant outdoor spirits.

Some healing solutions in such a situation are magic, herbal medicines, shaman's ceremony, and request for assistance from spirits of ancestors.

Special care is given to the mother and her newborn for thirty days.

Every person is believed to be born with a mandate of life. Such a mandate is comparable to a visa which has an expiration date. **Death occurs when the mandate expires.**

The most important social unit of Hmong society is the clan which influences the political, social, economic, and religious aspects of Hmong culture. Currently Hmong Americans recognize eighteen clans. The clan is a group of families, of which all the individuals share the same last name and are linked by a common set of ancestors. Marriage is taboo within the same clan. **Clan culture fosters respect for elders and the family, and the keeping of traditional ways. These ways are hierarchical and emphasize interpersonal relationships and interdependence.** At the family level, **all decisions are made by the husband or the head of the clan, more so for first generation Hmong.**

It is considered polite to avoid direct eye contact with elders and to employ a soft and gentle voice.

Traditional Hmong culture and religion are inextricably intertwined. Approximately seventy percent of Hmong Americans practice traditional animist Hmong religion (see below). One-third of Hmong in the US today are Christian, many of whom belong to the Christian Missionary Alliance Church. Christianity, which some Hmong feel has shown intolerance of traditional Hmong beliefs, poses a threat to traditional communal harmony. But it is known that Hmong Christians may also engage in traditional Hmong practices when there is a health care crisis. Indeed, Christianity can assist in facilitating Hmong utilization of western health care.

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

Reincarnation and fate are central to traditional Hmong belief. Hmong also believe that

- there are good and evil spirits everywhere.
- each person has at least three souls, one soul occupying the head area, one the torso, and the third, the leg area.
- soul and body exist in unity. A soul may leave the body through fright, highly emotional circumstances, or extreme sadness. Spirits can kidnap the soul.
- a soul can change into other forms of life. When so transformed, it does not recognize its owner and cannot return. As a result, the owner becomes seriously ill and death can result.
- when a soul cannot find its way back home, ritual family practices symbolically serve to guide the soul back.

Hmong shamans, both male and female, are traditional communicators with the spirit world. They deal with the prevention and/or treatment of illness. Their rituals and incantations, which are handed down via oral tradition from shaman to pupil, **are the primary processes for traditionally curing spirit-related illness.**

Hmong pride themselves on their ability to understand a broad range of subjects, including complex diseases. They **maintain a holistic perception of health. Both physical and spiritual well-being is emphasized.**

For Hmong, illness consists of disruption in nature, or disequilibrium. It is a condition that renders an individual incapable of performing normal functions. Types of illness are natural, organic, magical, or supernatural.

Involvement of the Hmong shaman, who plays a central role in the healing process, often includes animal sacrifice. Payment is made if the sick person gets better.

The Hmong experience illness and death as part of the normal cycle of life. Both are believed to be caused by bad luck, bad deed(s) committed in a prior life, or inevitable fate. **An ideal stance toward illness and death is to be serene and stoic.**

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

Hmong believe that planning in advance for death opens the door to evil spirits. Use of the word “death” or any terminal condition is avoided.

Elderly Hmong prefer to die at home in comfort and privacy and in the presence of the house spirits and family members. **Not to die at home is considered a curse.**

Hmong expressions of grief include touching and caressing the deceased, wailing and weeping loudly.

CHALLENGES TO HEALTH CARE²

Some Hmong, especially seniors and recent arrivals from Thai refugee camps, do not understand or speak English.

Herbal remedies given by Hmong herbalists may contain pharmacologically active substances that adversely interact with prescription drugs. **Western providers may not have herbal healing traditions on the one hand and sufficient knowledge of traditional Hmong health practices on the other.**

Hmong may lack knowledge about the US health care system and how it functions. Due to their experience of state assistance in refugee camps in Thailand, they **may harbor stereotypes about the medical industry.** These may discourage them from obtaining care.

Hmong may understate problems and seldom express feelings. A response of “OK” or “yes” may actually mean “no.” **It is difficult to obtain information from Hmong about emotional problems, hardships and suffering, family conflicts, sex life, and sexual problems.** They are not accustomed to detailed history taking.

Recent Hmong immigrants may be married culturally but not legally. In such cases they may experience **problems with obtaining spousal or family health insurance coverage.** For example, if one of the parties has health insurance through their place of employment, it may cover the “legal” but not the “cultural” spouse.

²Please see Introduction for elements which are of common concern to all five new immigrant groups of the HCWR series.

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CHALLENGES TO HEALTH CARE (CONTINUED)

Families often appear to be over-involved and make decisions for the patient. Patient illness is seen as a family, or even a clan, problem.

Many Hmong believe that

- **surgery may interfere with reincarnation** after they die.
- **surgery may make the body accessible to evil spirits.**
- blood maintains balance in the body and is a non-renewable vital energy, hence **they are reluctant to have blood drawn.**
- **cancer cannot be treated successfully and they fear rejection by the community for having the disease.** This may pose a barrier to any type of cancer screening.

Autopsy is not allowed because, according to Hmong belief, it will interfere with reincarnation.

An outcome of the traumatic circumstances in which Hmong had to leave their country as refugees is the **high prevalence in their community of psychiatric disorders**, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. **Stigma of mental illness may invoke shame and inadequacy.** Patients may lack awareness of the availability of effective mental health treatment.

Some lab tests are difficult to explain in Hmong.

BEST PRACTICES FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

It is advisable to learn a few basic words and phrases in Hmong to greet a Hmong patient appropriately and put her or him at ease.

For example:

In greeting a patient, one might say: Nyob Zoo. This is in Hmong Roman script. It is pronounced: Nah Zhong.

In parting from the patient, a caregiver could say: Sib Ntsib Dua. It means Goodbye. It is pronounced: She Gee Duo.

HMONG AND HEALTH CARE

BEST PRACTICES FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS (CONTINUED)

Pronunciation of words in Hmong isn't as easy as it appears. Spoken and written Hmong use eight tones and tonal markers respectively. Words may sound very similar to the ears of non-Hmong, but the meaning of a word changes depending on the tone. Since there is a yawning gap between the written Hmong alphabet and spoken Hmong, **it would help to break the ice for the provider to get the patient or family to help with proper pronunciation.**

It pays to take the time to patiently establish a trusting relationship with one's Hmong patient. That would be one way for the provider to respect the patient's wish to become more open at her or his own pace. **Employing a soft and gentle voice and honoring individual expressions of Hmong culture are also recommended.** **An indirect and positive approach is generally more successful with Hmong.**

The provider should not talk directly about death. Euphemisms for death widely employed are "time to say goodbye," "last breathing," or "living a 120-year life."

Family involvement greatly enhances Hmong patient adherence to treatment. It is useful to include the Hmong family at every step of the therapeutic process.

It helps to connect the Hmong patient with Hmong community organizations. One way to achieve this would be to involve a social worker to increase the patient's awareness of available social services.

As circumstances permit, **Hmong spiritual healing could be used to supplement biomedical practices for more successful Hmong patient outcomes.** In cities where Hmong dwell in significant numbers, health care facilities might do well to regularly consult a knowledgeable Hmong elder or shaman on a professional basis.