

**SIKH
PATIENTS
IN
HOSPITALS**

**A GUIDE FOR HEALTHCARE
PROFESSIONALS**

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INTRODUCTION

SIKH PATIENTS IN HOSPITALS

The objective of this publication is to provide guidelines for health care professionals looking after Sikh patients in hospitals. The aims are:

- To provide a basic understanding of the Sikh faith as relevant to the hospital environment.
- Highlight issues, which may be of direct relevance to health care staff when dealing with ill and dying patients.

It should be noted that within each religious group there is a whole spectrum of beliefs and practices from non-observance to extreme orthodoxy. Assumptions by health professionals about the importance of religion and rites for an individual must be avoided. The patient must be consulted. The patient's family should also be part of the consultation. If neither is possible then the local Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) or a devout Sikh contact will be ready to help in all circumstances. Sikhs do not have a priestly order, clergymen, monks or nuns. Any practicing Sikh is able to act as a leader in conducting a worship ceremony by reading or singing of Hymns.

In this publication we will first consider some of the basic beliefs of the Sikh faith. Then some specific issues will be highlighted.

SIKH PATIENTS – HEALTH CARE ISSUES

KEY ITEM SUMMARY

Basic Beliefs

- Sikhs belief in One God, ten Sikh Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib – the Sikh holy Scripture and the Initiation Ceremony.
- Sikh Names: All males have the name SINGH.
All females have the name KAUR.
- Five articles of Faith (usually referred to as five K's)

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
| Kesh | Unshorn Hair. |
| Kanga | Comb. |
| Karra | Steel bangle. |
| Kirpan | Sword. |
| Kachhaira | Underwear. |

Health Care Issues

- Five articles of Faith – Respect the five Articles of Faith (5 K's). Initiated Sikhs will have these on their person at all times.
- Hair – Hair should not be cut or shaved without the patient's consent.
- Turban – A Sikh may choose to cover his or her head with a turban or a scarf at all times.
- Diet – Some Sikhs are vegetarian.
- Medication – There is no religious prohibition.
- Blood transfusion is permitted.
- Euthanasia – There is no place for mercy killing in the Sikh faith.

- **Abortion** is seen as an act of willful destruction of human life. However under strong medical opinion a Sikh may accept an authoritative decision.
- **Organ donation** – There is no religious objection.
- **Artificial reproduction** – Only permitted during a continuing marriage.
- **Genetic engineering** – Is acceptable to affect a cure. Opposed to human cloning.

Birth: The naming of a child may not be possible immediately after birth. Time is needed for a naming ceremony.

Death: In the event of death the following should be noted:

- Non-Sikhs may attend the body at death.
- Respect the five articles of Faith of the deceased. They should not be removed.
- No hair should be cut or trimmed.
- Eyes are closed and limbs straightened.
- The body will be washed according to Sikh tradition.
- Cremation takes place as soon as possible.

Post mortem: There is no religious objection. Respect five articles of Faith. Funeral arrangements should not be unnecessarily delayed.

BASIC BELIEFS

A Sikh, meaning disciple, is one who believes in One God, the ten Sikh Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh sacred scriptures), and the Sikh initiation ceremony of Amrit.

Sikhism is a path of discipline of meditating on God's name, earning an honest living, sharing one's earnings with the needy and rendering selfless service to humanity.

God

To Sikhs there is only One God who is the creator and source of all beings. God is known by a myriad of names, all based on His attributes described in Guru Granth Sahib. One name in particular by which Sikhs remember God is WAHEGURU. The word Waheguru is an expression of the great wonder and ecstasy inspired by the Creator and His Creation. Guru Granth Sahib begins as follows: 'There is One God, The Eternal Truth, The Creator, All-Pervading Divine Spirit, Fearless, Without Hate, Without Enmity, Immortal Entity; Unborn, Self-Existent'.

The relationship between God and spiritual beings is that between Creator and creation, and is based on love. While God is True, the creation is transitory and short-lived but is the essence of His Being. Spiritual beings are expected to be completely in tune with God's Will and abide by it.

Sikh Gurus

The Sikh faith was founded by Guru Nanak who was born in 1469 near Lahore, now in Pakistan. Nine other Gurus who continued his teachings over a period of 239 years succeeded Guru Nanak. Sikhs believe that all ten Gurus were one in spirit. In 1708 Guru Gobind Singh the tenth Guru proclaimed Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh Holy Scriptures) as the everlasting Guru of the Sikhs.

Guru Granth Sahib

The principles of the Sikh religion are enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib, the perpetual Guru of the Sikhs. The Sikh Gurus themselves compiled it. The 1,430 page scripture contains the writings of the Sikh Gurus and those of Muslim and Hindu saints. For Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib is the manifestation of the Guru's Spirit and through it Guru Nanak lives on in the Sikh Faith. Guru Granth Sahib contains the 'Gurbani'. It is the 'Voice of the Guru'. Sikhs worship One God and hold Guru Granth Sahib in great reverence. They read, recite or sing prayers from Guru Granth Sahib.

Daily Sikh prayers are extracts from Guru Granth Sahib and other Sikh Scriptures. These are contained in a 'Gutkaa' (a little prayer book). Sikhs handle the Gutkaas with respect. A Sikh patient in a hospital may leave this at the head of his bed.

A Sikh seeks spiritual union with God – a state of Bliss. Human life is an opportunity to attain that goal. Sikhs should remember God at all times and practise living a virtuous and truthful life. Remembrance of God is continuous and constant irrespective of the state of health of the individual.

The Sikh faith recognises and preaches the equality of all human beings, men and women alike, irrespective of caste, colour or creed.

With complete faith in God, a Sikh lives in an ever-ascending spirit of optimism. This is reflected in the Sikh greeting - *Waheguru ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru ji ki Fateh*, which means - the Khalsa belongs to God, Victory is of the Lord.

Sikh Initiation – Amrit

Five practicing Sikhs, in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, are authorised to initiate a newcomer into the faith. The Sikhs who have taken their vows are obliged to observe the tenets of the Sikh faith and lead a disciplined life. The Sikh tenets prescribe the use of Singh and Kaur as Sikh names, prescribed articles of faith at all times and the recitation of daily prayers. There are other observances and prohibitions such as abstinence from alcohol and tobacco.

Prayer

Prayer is part of the daily routine of the life of a Sikh. It is spiritually uplifting and a good stress management technique. Devout Sikhs may internalize the continuous remembrance of God's Name and recite daily prayers.

Rise early in the morning, repeat the Name, and night and day meditate on the Lord. No anxiety shall befall thee and thy calamity shall vanish. (GGS p.255)

The daily prayers are recited at dawn before breakfast, in the evening before sunset and at night when retiring to bed. At other times throughout the day Sikhs may read from the 'Gutkaas'. Some may read the 'Sukhmani Sahib' – the Psalm of Peace, or other compositions from the holy scriptures.

Sikhs have a very strong belief that prayer and faith in God provide a cure for the ailments of mind and body. Prayers provide the patient with a sense of peace and joy, the will to fight illness and the strength to accept pain or suffering.

It is important that as far as practicable the Sikh daily routine of prayer should be maintained and encouraged at the hospital. The patients may recite the prayers themselves. Any practicing Sikh, family and friends or pastoral care worker may read prayers to the patient. Some privacy may be required for this purpose.

Every hospital has a chapel for patients of Christian faith. Non-Christians are asked to use the chapel for their prayers. Given that Australia professes multiculturalism it would be helpful if a prayer room were made available where ethnic minority communities can feel comfortable in a serene atmosphere to say their prayers and fulfil their obligations. A washbasin or a washing area of some sort in the room will be helpful for ablution prior to prayers.

Sikh Names

Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Guru of the Sikhs) is the spiritual father and Mata Sahib Kaur is the spiritual mother of the Sikhs. So all Sikh males have the name 'Singh' (meaning lion) and all females have the name 'Kaur' (meaning princess).

A married lady may be addressed as Madam Kaur rather than Mrs. Singh. However there are many Sikhs who use their family name instead of Singh or Kaur. The choice must be theirs. But a devout Sikh who follows the tenets of the Sikh faith will always use Singh or Kaur as their surnames. An advantage is that one is able to identify the sex of the person by his or her surname.

Articles of Faith – Five K's

The initiated Sikhs (both male and female) will insist on maintaining the five articles of faith on their person at all times. These are referred to as five K's because each article begins with the letter K from the Gurmukhi script. These are:

- Kesh: Uncut hair are a gift from God representing spirituality.
- Kanga: A comb usually tucked in the hair to keep it clean and tidy.
- Karra: A bracelet usually of stainless steel; represents self-restraint and link to God.
- Kirpan: A ceremonial sword, an emblem of courage and commitment to truth and justice.
- Kacchhaira: Underpants of a unique design, representing purity of moral character.

The above articles of faith are worn in compliance with the Sikh Code of Conduct as a matter of Discipline. These enable the Sikhs to honour the teachings, wishes and memory of the Gurus. Some Sikhs are very sensitive and feel very uncomfortable if any of these articles of faith are removed from their person.

The religious significance of the headdress (a male turban or a female scarf) should be respected because it is a covering for one of the 5K's and is also a symbol of a Sikh's honour.

Generally practicing Sikhs do not cut their hair and do not consume tobacco products, alcohol, intoxicants or other illicit drugs.

SPECIFIC ISSUES RELATING TO HEALTH CARE

Medical and Nursing Care

Important aspects in care of Sikh patients include:

- Be sensitive to the significance of the Sikh's 5 K's (articles of faith) which they may choose to wear on their person at all times. Again, they are uncut hair, a wooden comb, a steel bracelet, underwear and a ceremonial sword.
- A Sikh male patient may not remove his turban or may wear a 'Patka' (Scarf) while in hospital. The headdress should be respected and if removed, it should be given to the family or placed with the patient's personal belongings. Do not place the headdress with the shoes.
- Infants may be required to wear religious symbols e.g. "karra".
- The patient or family (or the parents in case of a child) should be consulted prior to shaving or removing hair from any part of the body. This applies to both male and female patients.
- Women patients may prefer to be examined by a female doctor, but will not object to a male doctor's examination if a female nurse is present.

Diet / Food Preferences and Practices

There are some variations in diets within the Sikh communities. The dietary practices of each individual must be respected. The following should be noted:

- Sikhs will not eat halal (or kosher) meat.
- Some Sikhs are vegetarians. Generally Sikhs would prefer if hospital food were supplemented with food from home.

- Some Sikhs will not eat beef. This is a carry over of deference to Hindu majority and sensitivities. There is no religious prohibition for a Sikh on consuming beef as such.

Sikhs who follow the tenets of the Sikh faith do not fast. This is a matter for the individual and for personal reasons.

Medication

There are no religious prohibitions affecting medication.

Blood transfusion

The Sikh faith does not prohibit such practices. In fact it is a privilege for a Sikh to help a fellow being. There are many who have received blood transfusions. It is left to the individual to exercise its merits.

Euthanasia

There is no place for mercy killing in Sikhism. The problem should be attended to by providing medical relief and alleviation of pain. The expert physician has no right as such to end life. If the physician cannot cure, he or she must not destroy it.

Abortion

- Requesting for an abortion is seen as an act of wilful destruction of human life. When conception takes place in normal married life it must be accepted as a gift from God. Sikh Scriptures exhort us to see the body as the abode for a soul on its journey to God realisation. Its use should be sensible and judicious.
- If abortion were advised by strong medical opinion, Sikhs would accept the authoritative decision. Nonetheless the patient and her relatives must be consulted. It must be explained why such a decision is best for the patient.

Organ Donation

There is no religious objection to organ donation. This is left to the individual or family wishes.

Artificial Reproduction

Artificial reproductive technology is permitted only during the span of a continuing marriage between husband and wife.

Genetic Engineering

Genetic engineering to cure a disease is acceptable. To date, Sikhs are opposed to human cloning.

Birth

A birth of a child is a moment of great joy for a Sikh family. However there is no required immediate religious ceremony at birth. But, a short prayer may be offered with the distribution of sweets to celebrate the occasion. Subsequently when the family is ready, a Naming ceremony may be held at home or at the Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship). After a short prayer, the name of the child is taken from the first letter of the random reading of a passage from the Guru Granth Sahib. This will give the child his/her first name. The surname Singh or Kaur is added.

End of Life Care

- Sikhs believe that whosoever is born has eventually to die. The physical body is perishable but the soul is eternal. The soul, in its journey to God, goes through a cycle of births and deaths and yearns for reunion with the Supreme Being. Liberation from the cycle of birth and death from millions of life forms, is the basis of the Sikh understanding of the purpose of life. As the soul moves along it accumulates merits depending on its karmas. However good karmas alone may not be sufficient to save the soul from distress and

misery arising out of worldly life. Only singing the praises of God through the Divine Word, can bring one closer to God. The doctrine of karma ceases to operate through God's Grace.

- Human life is a gift of the Divine and its end marks a return to the Divine Source. A person approaching death can be mentally and spiritually prepared to face the inevitable. The person can be reminded to concentrate on God and Sikh Gurus and to trust in God's Will, and in the Guru's power and protection.
- Kirtan (the singing of hymns) is a powerful way to build the trust and direct relationship with God. The ill or dying patient may therefore listen to kirtan continuously. Family members may read prayers for the ill or dying person. There are no specific formal religious ceremonies or rites at the time of dying but the family may summon a practicing Sikh or the Granthi (reader) from the Gurdwara to read selected prayers such as the 'Psalm of Peace'.

In the event of death the following should be noted.

- Non-Sikhs may attend the body at death.
- It is essential that the five K's (articles of faith) of the deceased be respected. They should not be removed from the body.
- No hair should be cut or trimmed.
- Eyes are closed and limbs are straightened.
- The body should be covered with clean linens and shrouded.
- The body will be washed according to Sikh tradition by the next of kin or relatives and friends.
- Cremation takes place as soon as possible.

Post-mortem

There are no religious objections to post-mortem examination. However some may find them unnecessary and unacceptable and may object to such examination. The legal reasons, if any must be fully explained to the family before the post-mortem is done. It is important to the family that such a procedure does not delay the funeral arrangements. During the post-mortem the five articles of Sikh faith are handled with respect and hair and beard must not be cut or shaved.

Funeral arrangements

Sikhs cremate their dead, wherever possible (even if stillborn).

Family members will be anxious for early release of the body for the funeral to take place as soon as it is practically possible. Coping with unfamiliar organisational procedures of death and cremation can be extremely distressing to bereaved relatives. Careful explanation and practical help from the hospital authorities may be needed to contact the funeral director and to deal with the paper work to expedite the procedure.

In accordance with Sikh Scripture, passing away of a Sikh is no cause for grief or sorrow. Ideally, one must accept the Will of God, without distress.

For assistance with any further queries on the Sikh Faith and Traditions,
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