

Cultural Competency

Lack of awareness about cultural differences can make it difficult for both providers and patients to achieve the best, most appropriate care. Despite all our similarities, fundamental differences among people arise from nationality, ethnicity, and culture, as well as from family background and individual experiences. These differences affect health beliefs, practices, and behavior on the part of both patient and provider, and also influence the expectations that patient and provider have of each other.

Often in the medical community (and the community in general) there is lack of awareness of these differences and their impact. This most likely results from a combination of factors that may include:

- **Lack of knowledge** - resulting in an inability to recognize the differences
- **Self-protection/denial** - leading to an attitude that these differences are not significant, or that our common humanity transcends our differences
- **Fear of the unknown or the new** - because it is challenging and perhaps intimidating to get to understand something that is new, that does not fit into one's world view
- **Feeling of pressure due to time constraints** - which can lead to feeling rushed and unable to look in depth at an individual patient's needs

The consequences of this lack of cultural awareness may be multiple. Patient-provider relationships are affected when understanding of each other's expectations is missing. Miscommunication results from this. The provider may not understand why the patient does not follow instructions: for example, why the patient takes a smaller dose of medicine than prescribed (because of a belief that Western medicine is "too strong"); or why the family, rather than the patient, makes important decisions about the patient's health care (because in the patient's culture, major decisions are made by the family as a group). Likewise, the patient may reject the provider (and the entire system) even before any one-on-one interaction occurs because of non-verbal cues that do not fit expectations. For example, "The doctor is not wearing a white coat - maybe he's not really a doctor; or, "The doctor smiles too much. Doesn't she take me seriously?"

What constitutes cultural competence is up for debate. Some use the terms cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness as synonyms, while others believe these are steps along the road to cultural competence.

The need for cultural competency is real and growing. The profile of the American population is increasingly racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse. The 2000 census revealed that 17.4 million workers (12.4% of the civilian labor force) were foreign-born. More than 20% of the U.S. population is of "foreign-stock," defined as foreign-born or having at least one foreign-born parent. And the number of persons who speak a language other than English at home exceeds 30 million.*