Taking Care of Hmong Patients*

Some background:
- Estimated 275,000 Hmong in the United States
- Primarily California, Minnesota, Wisconsin (Racine, Wausau)
- Assisted the CIA in northern Laos in Vietnam War
  - 30-40,000 died
  - 1975 – when US pulled out, the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao vowed to ‘wipe out’ the Hmong
  - Many refugees fled to Thailand
  - Started to go to US mainly in 1980’s, another group coming since 2004
- Settled in the US, but then re-settled so that clans could be together
- 18 clans
  - Must marry someone from a different clan
  - Clan leader selected by the clan at large, expected to make major health decisions

Communication
- Language (Hmoob) is divided into white Hmong and green or blue Mong
  - “Mong” is spelling used to differentiate green from white sometimes
  - Similar to British versus American English
  - Not a written language until the 1950s
- Prefer limited eye contact and usually don’t look at faces in conversation
- Handshakes are not traditional
  - Considered rude for a man to squeeze a woman’s hand too much
- Do NOT praise children – is believed to put them at risk with evil spirits
- May say ‘okay’ if feeling pressured to mean ‘no’
- May not directly criticize care, but will find someone else to see if dissatisfied
- Ask for head of household when wanting to discuss health information
- Do NOT share information on terminal illness directly with a patient before talking with family/clan leaders
- USE A TRAINED, PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATOR

Good words to know:
- **Nyob Zoo** = “Hello.” Pronounced “Nah Zhong”
- **Sib Ntsib Dua** = “Goodbye.” Pronounced “She Gee Duo”
- Yes = “Yog”, Yes! = aws, No = tsis kam/ tsis ua

Religion
- 2/3 follow animist tradition, 1/3 Christian
- Believe in reincarnation
• Everything has a spiritual element that survives independently  
  o Various traditions will assign people 3-30 associated souls  
• Spirits can be ancestral, nature based, domestic, or evil (dhabs)  
• Will sometimes use animal sacrifice as part of religious ceremony

**Hmong Healing**

• There can be physical or spiritual explanations for things  
• Shamanism – small surveys indicate 75% use shamans regularly  
  o Shaman can be man or woman, any age  
  o Have hx of unusual illness which becomes a calling to be a healer  
  o Some deal with that illness, others more generalist  
  o Have to prove they can treat their families first  
  o How they do things  
  ▪ Tend not to charge, but family will give gifts if successful  
  ▪ Concept of soul loss (poob plig) – people can lose a part of their spiritual selves  
    ▪ Sudden fright  
    ▪ Too much fear or grief  
    ▪ Capture of soul by evil spirit  
    ▪ Attempt to transfer to another body to escape unhappiness  
  ▪ Shamans travel to the spirit world and negotiate for the soul  
  ▪ Risk of losing their souls in the process

• Labor and delivery  
  o Placenta viewed as part of a person – called the ‘birth shirt’  
  o Prefer to bury them – boy’s under center of home, girl’s under bed  
    ▪ Connection with ancestors  
  o Naming ceremony 3 days after birth  
  o Mothers/infants discouraged from travel/visiting  
    ▪ 30 days of rest, eating ‘hot’ foods  
  o Regarding children, direct communication to the father  
  o Tend not to circumcise  

• Healing may involve herbs, magic, or cupping/spooning/coning – don’t mistake the latter for abuse  
• Blood thought to maintain balance; phlebotomy may be thought to cause weakness  
  o Quantify amount of blood taken  
• Autopsy may inhibit reincarnation  
• Surgery may be thought to open the body to access by evil spirits  
• Some believe the clothes you die in are what you wear in the afterlife

“If you don’t get better from medicine, there is something wrong with your soul.” - Hmong shaman, quoted in U of MN research study
Other customs/considerations

- Keep appropriate distance from members of the opposite sex
- Many children seem to be particularly good at visual learning, hands-on
- Polygamy rare, especially in men <40
- Celebrate New Year between 12/1 and 1/15
- In Laos, ordered lives around the sun; specific clock times may be a challenge
- Corporal punishment not uncommon

*These are generalizations and may not apply to every clan or every individual. There is no better way to be sensitive to cultural issues than to ASK THE PATIENT AND FAMILY