



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
 - 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

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

Hmong Healing

- There can be physical or spiritual explanations for things
- Shamanism – small surveys indicate 75% use shamans regularly
 - Shaman can be man or woman, any age
 - Have hx of unusual illness which becomes a calling to be a healer
 - Some deal with that illness, others more generalist
 - Have to prove they can treat their families first
 - 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
 - Placenta viewed as part of a person – called the ‘birth shirt’
 - Prefer to bury them – boy’s under center of home, girl’s under bed
 - Connection with ancestors
 - Naming ceremony 3 days after birth
 - Mothers/infants discouraged from travel/visiting
 - 30 days of rest, eating ‘hot’ foods
 - Regarding children, direct communication to the father
 - 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
 - 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

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**