Death and Bereavement: The Customs of Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems

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Reprinted from an article originally published in the British Medical Journal by kind permission of the Editor and the author.

Immigration from the Indian subcontinent into Britain occurred mainly between 1950 and 1970, but with a few exceptions the health services have not attempted to understand or provide for their Asian patients. It is possible, though undesirable, to manage an illness without regard to a patient's ethnic origin, but to be ignorant of the religious beliefs and needs of a dying patient and his relatives is unforgivable. Much distress and offence can be caused by lack of understanding.

Though acknowledging the importance of the religions of non-Asian minority groups in Britain, I think that difficulties and misunderstandings are more likely with Asian patients whose cultures and beliefs differ considerably from those of 'Western' religions. This article considers only the three main religions of the Indian subcontinent—Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam. It should be appreciated that within Hinduism and Islam, and to a lesser extent Sikhism, there are wide variations in attitudes depending on the country of origin or adherence to a particular sect. A distinction should also be made between those who have come from east Africa and those who have come to Britain direct. In general, Asian men from east Africa are businessmen, shopkeepers, or members of the professions and have a more sophisticated approach than their counterparts from the Indian subcontinent, who have generally come from rural areas.

Hospitals, clinics, and practices in an area with a sizable population of a particular ethnic group or groups should make adequate provision for them.[1-3] Lists of religious or community leaders should be available, and, in areas where the numbers merit it, hospitals might consider the appointment of one or more of these leaders to a post equivalent to that of hospital chaplain. Ward staff should know that in some Asian cultures grief is shown more openly than is the custom in the West, and the provision of a side ward for the dying patient is a humane and sensible gesture.

The symbols of Christianity should be removed from chapels of rest and crematoria when these are being used by non-Christians; sheets used to wrap the body should be plain. Hindus and Moslems but not Sikhs believe that non-members of their faiths should not touch the dead body, and if it is necessary for them to do so they should wear gloves. Jewellery and other insignia of possible religious significance should not be removed from the body without permission of the relatives.

HINDUISM

The majority of the Hindus in Britain come from Gujarat, in western India, or from east Africa. Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, embracing a way of life and a social system. Hindus believe in a supreme being residing in each individual, and the ultimate goal is the release of the individual's soul from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to join the supreme being. A person's deeds in his past lives determine his status and good or ill fortune in his present life, whose quality, in turn, governs his future.

Religious Organisation

In Hinduism there is no supreme church authority and no hierarchy. Numerous gods are worshipped, each being the personification of a particular aspect of the supreme being. Most families worship at a shrine in their home and attend the temple (mandir) for communal worship. The temple is in the care of a priest (pundit, a teacher), generally a Brahmin (a member of the highest caste), chosen and supported by the community. The priest has no parochial functions but may come to the hospital to pray with the relatives of a dying person.

Imminent Death

When death is thought to be near the dying person is given water from the River Ganges (Ganga), and the family or priest read from one of the holy books of Hinduism. The priest may tie a thread round the neck or wrist; this should not be removed. Many Hindu patients prefer to die at home, and this should be respected whenever possible.

After Death

As previously described, gloves should be worn by non-Hindus when touching or moving the body. The body is generally covered with a plain white sheet, though married Hindu women are often shrouded in red fabric. Normally the family wish to wash and lay out the body; this may be done at home or at an undertaker's.

Funeral Arrangements

The eldest son is generally responsible for making the funeral arrangements. All Hindus, except stillborn babies and young children (see below), are cremated. In India this is done on the day of death, but the formalities required in Britain make this impracticable; nevertheless, death and cremation certificates should be provided with the least possible delay. Crematorium authorities should ensure the removal of Christian symbols for the service and their replacement by the symbol OM, signifying the supreme being. A well informed undertaker may be of assistance with the arrangements for the cremation. Ideally, the ashes should be scattered over the waters of the Ganges, but in Britain the ashes are scattered at sea, or over any large expanse of water: permission must be obtained for this.

Mourning

The family is in mourning until the thirteenth day after the cremation, when a special ceremony takes place.

Necropsies

Necropsies are not generally approved of, but those legally required by a coroner are accepted, provided that the situation is fully explained.

Organ Donation and Transplant Operations

There are no religious prohibitions against the giving or receiving of organs.

Termination of Pregnancy

The only widely accepted reason for termination is when an unmarried woman becomes pregnant, although there is considerable variation in attitudes.

Prenatal Testing

Since the outcome of a prenatal test may be the advice to terminate the pregnancy, such investigations, whether invasive or not, should not be embarked on without a very full explanation to both parents. It should not, however, be assumed that termination will be refused. The concept of genetic counselling is not widely understood.

Stillbirths and the Deaths of Young Children

A stillbirth is regarded, from the spiritual point of view, as no different from a child who has lived

and then died. Stillborn babies and children under the age of four years (the actual age varies with local custom) are not cremated, as it is held that they cannot stand the heat of cremation and have no awareness of their past actions. Burial can be arranged in a special area of a local cemetery. The formalities for the death of a child vary, but the mourning period and ceremony are usually observed as for an adult.

SIKHISM

The Sikhs in Britain have come from the state of Punjab in India or from east Africa. The word Sikh means disciple or follower. The Sikh religion was founded by a Hindu, Guru Nanak, in the sixteenth century. Guru Nanak reacted against the excessive ritual, the priestly dominance, and the caste system of Hinduism. Sikhs believe in one god, and Guru Nanak is revered as a man chosen by God to reveal his message. In Sikhism men and women are equal.

Religious Organisation

There are no ordained priests in Sikhism; the Sikh temple (gurdwara) is in the care of a reader (granthi), who is appointed and supported by the community. The gurdwara may also be used as a social and advice centre and for children's classes in religion and Punjabi.

Imminent Death

When a person is close to death the family, sometimes accompanied by the granthi, pray at the bedside and read from the holy book the *Guru Granth Sahib.*

After Death

The Sikhs have no objection to the body being touched by non-Sikhs. The family usually lay out and wash the body themselves.

Funeral Arrangements

The body is taken to the undertaker's by way of the family home, where the coffin is opened so that the dead person may be seen for the last time. All Sikh men and women, in life and after death, must wear the five signs of Sikhism; these are: kesh, uncut hair (and beard); the kangha, a semicircular comb which fixes the uncut hair in a bun; the kara, a steel or occasionally gold bangle worn on the right wrist; the kirpan, a symbolic dagger worn under the clothes in a small cloth sheath or simply as a kirpan shaped brooch or pendant; and the kaccha, long undershorts reaching to the knees, now often replaced by ordinary underpants which have the same significance. Sikh men wear their turban after death.

All Sikhs, apart from stillborn babies and infants dying within a few days of birth, are cremated. The ashes are scattered at sea or in a river, or they may be taken to a holy place, commonly the River Sutlej at Anandpur.

Mourning

The family is in mourning for about 10 days, though this varies. The end of mourning is marked by a ceremony (Bhaug) held at the family home. For children under the age of 8 or 9 years the arrangements tend to be less formal.

Necropsies

There is no religious objection to necropsies, but there may be some resistance to the idea from families originating in rural Punjab, where these would not be usual.

Organ Donation and Transplant Operations

These are accepted.

Termination of Pregnancy

This is not generally approved except when an unmarried woman becomes pregnant.

Prenatal Testing

Though there is no religious objections to this, the idea of amniocentesis or fetal blood sampling may be unfamiliar and require considerable explanation. In any case, invasive investigations on the fetus should not be done if there is no likelihood of a termination being accepted.

Stillbirths and the Deaths of Young Children

The bodies of stillborn babies, or infants who have died within a few days of birth, are usually buried. The arrangements are similar to those for Hindu infants.

ISLAM

'Islam' means submission (to the will of God). A Moslem is a follower of Islam. Most Moslems in Britain come from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or the Mirpur district of Kashmir (Azad Kashmir); in some cities there are also quite large Turkish and Turkish Cypriot Moslem communities. The Islamic religion was founded by Mohammed, who was born in AD 570 in Mecca (Makka), now in Saudi Arabia. Moslems believe in one god (Allah) and that Mohammed was his prophet or messenger. Mohammed is regarded as the last of a long line of prophets, including Abraham, Moses, David, Job, John the Baptist, and Jesus. The *Koran (Quran)* consists of the teaching of Mohammed, and this together with his recorded sayings and acts constitute the Islamic legal system (Sharia), there being no distinction between religious and secular law. However, some countries such as Turkey have a separate secular legal system. Moslems believe in life after death and that a person will be judged by God according to his deeds, and may be sent to heaven or to hell.

Religious Organisation

The mosque (masjid) is the centre for worship and religious instruction; it is in the charge of a prayer leader (imam), who is elected and supported by the congregation. The imam is not required to atttend the death of a Moslem or to officiate at a burial but is usually invited to do so.

Imminent Death

The family pray at the bedside of the dying person, whose head must be turned towards Mecca; this may entail altering the position of the bed. The call to prayer is whispered into his ear.

After Death

Non-Moslems touching the body must wear gloves. Normally the family wash and lay out the body, either in the mortuary or at the undertaker's.

Funeral Arrangements

Moslems are buried and never cremated. Burial should take place as soon after death as possible. The body is taken to the mosque or to the graveside for prayers; women never go to the burial ceremony. Most local authorities provide special areas for Moslem burials. As it is not always possible in Britain to comply strictly with all the Islamic rules for burial, some families take their dead back to their country of origin; this entails much bureaucratic delay, which is very distressing to the relatives; but it is also the Islamic ideal to be buried in one's 'homeland'.

Mourning

The bereaved family are in mourning for three days after the funeral and visit the grave every Friday during the following 40 days.

Necropsies

As the body must not be cut or defaced routine necropsies are never accepted. Those required by the coroner are reluctantly accepted if the circumstances are explained to the relatives and safeguards are given that organs will not be removed.

Organ Donation and Transplant Operations

These are rarely permitted, but there is much variation in practice. Refusal should not be assumed.

Termination of Pregnancy

Termination is allowed only in order to save the life of the mother, but in practice it is increasingly used for social and medical reasons.

Prenatal Testing

In exceptional circumstances, where prenatal testing (especially

by non-invasive methods such as ultrasound) has clearly shown that the infant would be born severely handicapped or suffering from a severe and untreatable disease, the parents may agree to a termination. Prenatal testing and genetic advice are particularly important in Moslem families because of the high proportion of first or second cousin marriages.

Stillbirths and the Deaths of Young Children

There are no special formalities. In general, the body is given to the parents to make the necessary arrangements with the undertaker. It should be noted that for 40 days after delivery the mother is considered unclean and may not touch a dead body.

Helping or Counselling?

Nursing staff in particular can be of great help in advising bereaved and bewildered relatives on the procedures for registration of death, cremation certificates, and finding a suitable undertaker. The hospital chaplain may take on these duties and may be able to put relatives in touch with members of their own religion or community when no relatives are easily accessible. In discussions with some of the (male) leaders of the Hindus, Sikh, and Islamic communities I have not received the impression that there is a need for bereavement counsellors. It is difficult to obtain the women's viewpoint on this as traditionally, and often for linguistic reasons, the man speaks for his wife. It is, however, often acceptable for another woman to talk to a bereaved mother. The Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society has often been of help to bereaved Asian families, in spite of the linguistic and cultural differences; its address is 28 Portland Place, London W1N 3DE (Tel. 071-436 5881).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following for their help and advice: Pandit Mathoor Krishnamurti and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Institute of Indian Culture, London; Mr. Jaspal Singh Bamra, Southall; and Hadji Haslim Ali, the Islamic Mosque, Whitechapel Road, London.

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This article originally appeared in the British Medical Journal 1987; **295**: 536-539, in the series 'How to Do It', under the title: 'Broaden your mind about death and bereavement in certain ethnic groups .

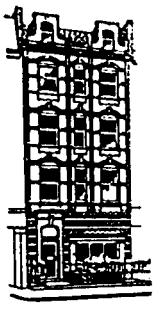
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