## **Cambodian Australians**

- Cambodian people first came to Australia as students from the 1950s to 1970s<sup>2</sup>.
- After a coup in Burma in 1970, a civil war began that led to a Communist Khmer Rouge takeover from 1975 to 1979. An invasion by Vietnam in 1979 ended the Khmer Rouge reign, but civil war continued until United Nations troops enforced a cease-fire in late 1991<sup>2-4,5</sup>.
- Of an estimated population of 7.1 million people in 1975, approximately two million Cambodians were killed during the four year Khmer Rouge rein. Approximately one million people were killed in the civil wars before and after this period<sup>2,4,5</sup>.
- From 1975, Cambodian people began to seek refuge in other countries including Australia<sup>2</sup>.
- Between 1978 and 1991, more than 500,000 Cambodians sought refuge in refugee camps in Thailand<sup>4</sup>.
- Between 1975 and 1986, 12,813
  Cambodians came to Australia as refugees<sup>2</sup>.
- By 2001, there were 23,000 Cambodiaborn people in Australia. Between 2001 and 2006, the number of Cambodiaborn people in Australia increased by 6.7 per cent to 24,530<sup>2</sup>.
- Places of transition: Thailand
- Ethnicity: The main ethnic group in Cambodia is Khmer (90 per cent)<sup>6,7</sup>. Smaller ethnic groups include Vietnamese (five per cent) and Chinese (one per cent)<sup>6,7</sup>.
- Language: Khmer is the official language and is spoken by 95 per cent of the population<sup>6,7</sup>. Other languages include French and English<sup>6,7</sup>.
- **Religion:** Buddhism is the official religion of Cambodia and is practiced by

Population of Cambodia-born people in Australia (2006 Census): 24,530<sup>1</sup>

Population of Cambodia-born people in Queensland: 1214<sup>1</sup>

Population of Cambodia-born people in Brisbane<sup>1</sup>: 1029<sup>1</sup>

Gender ratio (Queensland): 82.3 males per 100 females<sup>1</sup>

Median age (Australia): The median age of Cambodia-born people in Australia in 2006 was 40.3 years compared with 46.8 years for all overseas born and 37.1 for the total Australian population<sup>2</sup>.

#### Age distribution (Queensland)1:

Age	Per cent
0-19	7.6%
20-39	39.6%
40-59	39.5%
60+	13.2%

## Arrivals – past five years (Source – Settlement Reporting Database<sup>3</sup>)

Year	Australia	Queensland
2006	699	46
2007	724	46
2008	694	29
2009	940	48
2010	663	48

more than 96 per cent of the population. Muslims comprise approximately two per cent of the population<sup>6</sup>. Less than two per cent of the population are affiliated with other religions<sup>6</sup>.

**Community Profiles for Health Care Providers** 



## Ancestry, language and religion in Australia (2006 Census for Cambodia-born)

- The top ancestry<sup>ii</sup> responses of Cambodia-born people in Australia were:
  - Khmer 54.2 per cent
  - Chinese 35.6 per cent
  - Not stated 4.6 per cent<sup>2</sup>.
- The main languages spoken at home by Cambodia-born people in Australia were:
  - Khmer 65 per cent
  - Cantonese 10.6 per cent
  - Teochew 6 per cent.
- The main religion of Cambodia-born people in Australia was Buddhism (79.8 per cent).

#### Communication

- Traditionally, Cambodians do not address each other by name, but according to relationship (e.g. brother or uncle)<sup>8</sup>.
- The titles Sir and Madam are used for strangers<sup>8</sup>. It is advisable to use a person's title when addressing a Cambodian person directly (e.g. Mr, Mrs, Doctor)<sup>8</sup>.
- In Cambodia, names are usually written with the person's surname first followed by their given name<sup>8</sup>. Some Cambodians have adopted the Australian style of naming and have changed the order of their names, placing their surnames last<sup>8</sup>. Children can take either their father's surname or a personal name<sup>8</sup>.
- It is considered disrespectful to sit with the legs stretched out and the feet pointed towards a person<sup>8</sup>.
- The head is considered the spiritually highest part of the body and sensitivity is advised if it is necessary to touch the head<sup>8</sup>.
- Cambodian people may consider direct eye contact to be inappropriate. Some people may be reluctant to maintain eye contact with people seen as deserving of respect, such as a senior person<sup>8</sup>.

- A response of yes does not necessarily indicate agreement. The word yes is sometimes used to indicate that the listener is paying attention. It is important to obtain feedback from the person to ensure understanding, especially when gaining consent to treatment<sup>8</sup>.
- Cambodian people rarely appear desperate or distressed, even when experiencing significant anxiety or pain<sup>8</sup>.

### **Health in Australia**

- Average life expectancy in Cambodia is 62.7 years (male 60.3, female 65.1) compared to 81.7 years for all people living in Australia (male 79.3, female 84.3)<sup>6</sup>.
- There is little research on the physical and mental health status of Cambodiaborn Australians.
- Intestinal parasites are a common health problem among Cambodian Australians. A cross-sectional survey showed that 42 per cent of Cambodian Australians had a positive or equivocal serology for S stercoralis and 17 per cent had eosinohilia<sup>9</sup>.
- The blood diseases haemoglobin E and thalassemia minor have been observed in Cambodian refugees and migrants<sup>8</sup>.
- Overseas research shows that other common diseases affecting Cambodian people include tuberculosis and hepatitis B<sup>8</sup>.
- Dental problems including caries are common<sup>8</sup>. Some Cambodian Australians travel back to Cambodia for more affordable dental healthcare<sup>10</sup>.
- It has been shown that two decades after seeking refuge in the United States, the Cambodian population continues to have high rates of psychiatric disorders associated with trauma including post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression<sup>4</sup>.

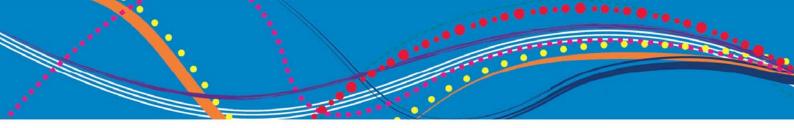
### Health beliefs and practices

- A belief in the hot and cold qualities of food and medicine is common. The body is seen as operating in a delicate balance between these two opposing elements. For example, diarrhoea is thought to be due to an excess of cold elements and skin rashes to an excess of hot elements<sup>8</sup>.
- Many Cambodian people believe that the body of a woman is made *cold* by labour. Women who have recently given birth may want to be kept very warm and may not want to shower post partum for up to three days, or may prefer a sponge bath. New mothers are often kept warm by being fed *hot* foods<sup>8</sup>.
- Spiritual healers may be sought for mental illnesses such as depression, and chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, as these illnesses are thought to be caused by spirits<sup>8,10</sup>.
- Cambodian people may explain the causes of illnesses in terms of both the natural and supernatural<sup>8</sup>.
- Traditional healing can include cupping, pinching or rubbing (also known as coining). In cupping, a cup is heated and then placed on the skin, usually on the forehead or abdomen, which creates a vacuum. These treatments can often leave some redness or bruising. The marks resulting from cupping and other traditional treatments have sometimes been mistaken by healthcare providers for signs of a more serious illness or domestic abuse<sup>8</sup>.
- Many Cambodian people use complementary and alternative medicines in conjunction with prescription medications to deal with physical or mental illness<sup>8,11</sup>.
- Attitudes and beliefs about Australian medical practices may vary<sup>8</sup>.
- Some Cambodian people may resist surgery or other invasive techniques. When such procedures are required, it may be necessary to explain the need for such treatment<sup>8</sup>.

- Cambodian people may have a fear of blood tests. Blood is thought to be replenished slowly, if at all, with any loss of blood seen as weakening the body<sup>8</sup>.
- Medication is frequently taken only for as long as the individual feels ill.
   Compliance with medications for a chronic disease can be difficult<sup>8</sup>.
- Many Cambodia-born women prefer to be examined by female health care providers<sup>8</sup>.
- Some Cambodian people may expect to receive medications for every illness, and injections are often seen as more effective than oral medications. It may be necessary to carefully explain why medication is not necessary<sup>8</sup>.
- When a Cambodian Buddhist is dying, a Buddhist monk or minister should be notified to provide chaplaincy services<sup>12</sup>. The monk will chant verses after the person has died to help release the person's *good* energies<sup>12</sup>. The state of mind at the time of death is considered important in determining the deceased person's next rebirth<sup>12</sup>.

### **Social determinants of health**

- The overall literacy<sup>iii</sup> rate in 2004 in Cambodia was 73.6 per cent (men 84.7 per cent, women 64.1 per cent)<sup>6</sup>.
- Cambodian people were subjected to an extremely traumatic period during the four year Khmer Rouge rein<sup>4</sup>.
   Cambodian people are considered the most traumatised of all South-East Asian people<sup>13</sup>. Many Cambodian people have experienced famine and starvation, witnessed death and destruction, and have spent long periods of time in refugee camps in Thailand<sup>14</sup>.
- Poor English proficiency, unemployment, older age, being retired or disabled, and living in poverty have been shown to be associated with higher rates of PTSD and major depression in Cambodian refugees<sup>4</sup>.

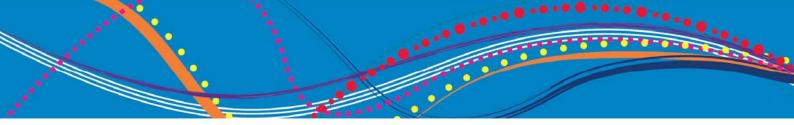


- Proficiency in English<sup>iv</sup> in Australia (2006 Census)<sup>1</sup>:
  - 63 per cent of Cambodia-born men and 76 per cent of Cambodia-born women reported that they spoke English well or very well
  - 32 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women reported that they did not speak English well
  - 5 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women reported that they did not speak English at all<sup>v</sup>.
- At the time of the 2006 census, 27.1 per cent of Cambodia-born people aged 15 years and older had some form of higher non-school qualifications<sup>vi</sup> compared to 52.5 per cent of the total Australian population<sup>2</sup>.
- The participation rate in the workforce (2006 census) was 59.1 per cent and unemployment rate was 11.4 per cent compared to the corresponding values of 64.6 per cent and 5.2 per cent in the total Australian population<sup>2</sup>. The median weekly income for Cambodiaborn people in Australia aged 15 years or older was \$328 compared to \$466 for the total Australian population<sup>2</sup>.
- A 2009 large-scale audit discrimination study based on job applications using ethnically distinguishable names showed that people with Asian sounding names were subject to discrimination in applying for jobs. People with Asian sounding names have to apply for more jobs to receive

the same number of interviews as people with Anglo-Saxon sounding names and those with names of more established migrant groups such as Italian, even if they have the same work history and education<sup>15</sup>.

# Utilisation of health services in Australia

- There is little research in Australia on the utilisation of health services by Cambodian Australians.
- Research in the United States showed that a high proportion of Cambodian Americans used American medicine for PTSD and major depression. Only a small percentage used complementary and alternative medicine exclusively. Utilisation of complementary medicine did not inhibit utilisation of American medicine, but was positively associated with seeking American medicine for mental illness<sup>11</sup>.
- Cost and language issues have been shown to be the major barriers to health care access for Cambodian refugees in the United States, including mental health care utilisation<sup>16</sup>.
- Cambodia-born women may avoid regular preventive pelvic and breast examinations because of embarrassment<sup>8</sup>.



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It should be noted that there is great diversity within communities and people do not fit into a pre-determined cultural box or stereotype. The information presented here will not apply to all Cambodian Australians and this profile should be considered in the context of the acculturation process.

i Brisbane is defined as Local Government Area of Brisbane in ABS Census data

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ii</sup> At the 2006 Census up to two responses per person were allowed for the Ancestry question, count is therefore total responses not person count.

iii Literacy is defined as those aged 15 and over who can read and write.

iv Missing and not-stated responses to this question on the census were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Community representatives state that the prevalence of people who cannot speak English is considerably higher than that reported by the Census and that there is error in census information resulting from children in the household completing the census on behalf of the family.

vi Non-school qualifications are awarded for educational attainments other than those of pre-primary, primary or secondary education.