



Preface

Cultural Diversity: A Guide for Health Professionals reflects a commitment to enhance the delivery and quality of health care to disadvantaged communities. It was developed partly in response to the needs of those who, because of their cultural, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, are uncomfortable with conventional services and believe them to be inappropriate and insensitive to culture and gender. But in addition, health providers have also voiced their difficulties in providing appropriate care to people from diverse backgrounds, when their knowledge of different communities is limited. There is little opportunity within curriculum of various health professions to provide adequate and appropriate training to meet these needs. The response in this guide is to provide simple and accessible information of direct use in a clinical or community setting.

Individuals vary in many ways. Historically Australians have expected people to assimilate into the dominant Anglo-Australian culture. We now celebrate cultural difference, and are becoming more attuned to the needs of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Experiences of health and illness vary widely, as a result of different beliefs, behaviours, past experience in Australia and experiences prior to migration. Good health care depends on our sensitivity towards these differences.

Cultural Diversity has been developed as a tool to assist you in this. It provides some basic information about different community groups and sections of the population. The guide includes the demography and epidemiological, cultural and migration backgrounds of a select number of ethnic groups in Queensland. An additional number of sections refer to key issues: issues relating to children and young people, women and major life cycle events such as pregnancy and birth, and torture and trauma. Each section also includes some generic information (phone number for TIS [translator and interpreter services], the Migrant Resource Centre, etc.), general community information, and summary data from research conducted with these communities.

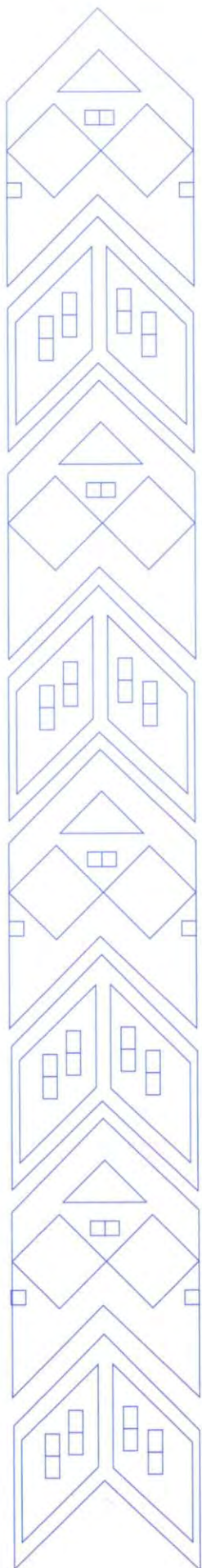
There are risks in summarising particular cultural issues that might be most important in the provision of health care. There is enormous diversity in populations of all cultures. We cannot hope to capture the complexity in a short document. In all societies, there are sub-cultures, and important differences between rural and urban groups, among different classes and genders. Even within these groupings individuals vary to the extent to which they fit this image. If Anglo-Australian culture was summarised in a few pages, is it likely that you would see yourself as fitting in with the stated norms?

Given this, the guide does not aim to turn you into an expert in all areas of culture and society - this would be impossible and is unnecessary. Neither does it provide a list of ready made rules for working with different cultural groups - this approach is antithetical to individualised and good quality care. Rather, the guide highlights some possible areas of difference. We all recognise that difference and diversity exists.

Cultural Diversity will be a ready and useful resource to identify certain issues that you may wish to explore with your clients/patients. It does not provide you with all the information you might need, but will help you get to a better starting point with your patient/client. Revealing some awareness of cultural issues conveys interest, concern and respect. This is likely to enhance rapport with your patients, as long as you don't assume that you know what they think and believe. *Ask your patient: He or she is their own cultural expert.*

Consider, too, the following points:

- The individual is the "foreground"; the culture is the "background".



- Individuals are not cultural cardboard cutouts, yet they are influenced by their socio-cultural context and by their changing circumstances. Different generations and individuals within the same family may have different sets of beliefs; some people assimilate and assume the cultural values of the host society while others maintain or blend different perspectives.
- The communities included in this guide have been in Australia for varying lengths of time. Australian South Sea Islanders, for example, have been in Australia for over a century. Other communities have arrived relatively recently, and many of their members may still be finding ways to interact with other cultures and communities, and new institutions and environments
- Not all people identify with their ethnic cultural background.
- Refugees are as diverse a group as any other people. People from a wide range of backgrounds may end up in the same circumstances as a result of political and economic turmoil. On the other hand, being aware that people share common problems or situations can help in understanding their health needs.

In addition, much is common across cultures. For example, most patients are nervous of clinical environments and are reluctant to question their doctors - regardless of their educational status, occupation, or ability to speak English. You need to be aware of your own cultural assumptions and of the culture of hospitals and bio-medicine, as well as its impact on people for whom this is unfamiliar. Further, although culture may be important, other factors may affect people's health care and health seeking behaviour - the gender of the patient and service provider, class position, education and knowledge of medicine, and access to transport.

Cultural Diversity is a guide only. Bear in mind:

- Respect the integrity of cultural beliefs. Individuals' explanations for their ill-health and their expectations of health care can affect their acceptance of treatments and the eventual outcome of health care.
- At the same time, people who may not share your explanations of the causes of their ill-health may even so accept conventional treatments - you don't have to 'convert' them to your way of thinking to get a good result.
- You do not have to agree with every aspect of another's culture just as the other person does not have to accept everything about yours - effective and culturally-sensitive health care can still occur.
- All of us are capable of identifying with our own culture, and forming prejudiced views about other cultures and other belief systems - the skill is in being aware of this possibility and recognising when it is occurring.
- This guide has been developed as one way of enhancing your competency to work with people from varying cultural backgrounds. It is supplemented by resource material relating to the needs of people from diverse backgrounds, and the ways in which these influence peoples' attitudes towards and experiences of hospitalisation, as they work through the hospital process from admission to discharge. *Guidelines to Practice: Providing care to patients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds* and the *Checklist for Cultural Assessment* are intended for health providers working primarily in clinical settings.

As noted on each profile, and in the prefaces of the companion volumes, these resources were developed for Queensland Health by the Australian Centre for International and Tropical Health and Nutrition at the University of Queensland, in association with health providers, clients and colleagues. The project was funded by the Performance Management Branch, Queensland Health. We wish to acknowledge the active and continuing contribution of Pat O'Brien of Queensland Health, to the project that resulted in this volume, and the ideals of health equity and social justice.

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