

1. Communication issues

The 2006 census showed that almost 70 per cent of Queensland's Sikh population was born overseas, with the majority of people coming from a non-English speaking country. Health care providers should be aware that many Sikh patients may not be proficient in English.

The other languages most widely spoken by Sikhs in Queensland are Punjabi and Hindi.

If a patient is assessed to have inadequate English, health care providers should engage a professional interpreter. Queensland Health provides a statewide interpreter service that can provide onsite, telephone and video remote interpreters in more than 100 languages.

Other Queensland Health resources which can assist with effective communication include:

- *Language Identification Card* – a card/poster which can assist health care providers to identify more than 60 languages
- *Guidelines on working with interpreters* – a comprehensive guide for health care providers on how to work with interpreters

- *Ward Communication Tool* – a booklet which features 30 words commonly used in health care, translated in 30 languages, with an accompanying graphic.

Further information about communicating with patients from a culturally and linguistically diverse background is contained in the *Queensland Health Multicultural Clinical Support Resource*.

www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/support_tools/mcsr.asp

2. Interpreter services

All Queensland Health patients have a right to an interpreter at no charge. Queensland Health policy is to always use a professional interpreter and to only use friends or family in an emergency. People under 18 years of age are never to be used as interpreters under any circumstances.

Queensland Health staff can request interpreters online through the Interpreter Services Information System (ISIS). Queensland Health staff should contact their Health Service District Interpreter Coordinator for more information.

www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/QHIS_contact.asp



3. Patient rights

Queensland Health supports and implements the Australian Charter of Healthcare Rights.

The charter specifies the key rights of patients and consumers when seeking or receiving healthcare services.

www.health.qld.gov.au/cpic/hlthcr_exp_improve/australiancharter.asp

Under the charter, all patients have seven health care rights:

- **Access** – a right to access healthcare services to address healthcare needs.
- **Safety** – a right to receive safe, high-quality health services provided with professional care, skill and competence.
- **Respect** – a right to be provided with care that shows respect to culture, beliefs, values and personal characteristics.
- **Communication** – the right to receive open, timely and appropriate communication about health care in a way that can be understood.
- **Participation** – the right to participate in making decisions and choices about care and about health service planning.
- **Privacy** – a right to the privacy and confidentiality of personal information.
- **Comment** – the right to comment on, or complain about care and have concerns dealt with promptly and properly.

There are three guiding principles which describe how the charter is applied in the Australian health system:

1. Everyone has the right to be able to access health care and this right is essential for the charter to be meaningful.
2. The Australian Government commits to international agreements about human rights which recognise everyone's right to have the highest possible standard of physical and mental health.
3. Australia is a society made up of people with different cultures and ways of life, and the charter acknowledges and respects these differences.

These rights apply to patients from all cultures and faiths in the health care setting.

4. Religious observance

Sikhism places the responsibility of practising religion on the individual. As a result, it is important that health care providers discuss religious observance needs with each patient.

Some topics that health care providers may wish to discuss with their patients include articles of faith; removal of hair; ablution, bathing and cleanliness; dietary needs; and prayer.

Articles of faith

- Sikhs are required to wear five articles of faith at all times. This applies to both men and women.
- These articles are known as the *Five Kakkars* or *Five Ks* – *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kangha* (wooden comb), *Kara* (steel bangle), *Kirpan* (short sword), and *Kachera* (undergarment)⁴.



Kesh – A Sikh's uncut hair signifies and inspires courage, loyalty and commitment. For men it includes an untrimmed beard and moustache. The hair remains uncut because it is seen as a divine gift from God.



Kanga – The wooden comb is a symbol of cleanliness and Sikhs are required to comb their hair with it twice a day.



Kara – The steel bangle signifies a bond of enduring love and commitment of God and Guru. It is a reminder to Sikhs to do righteous deeds and that their practical actions are guided by high moral values.

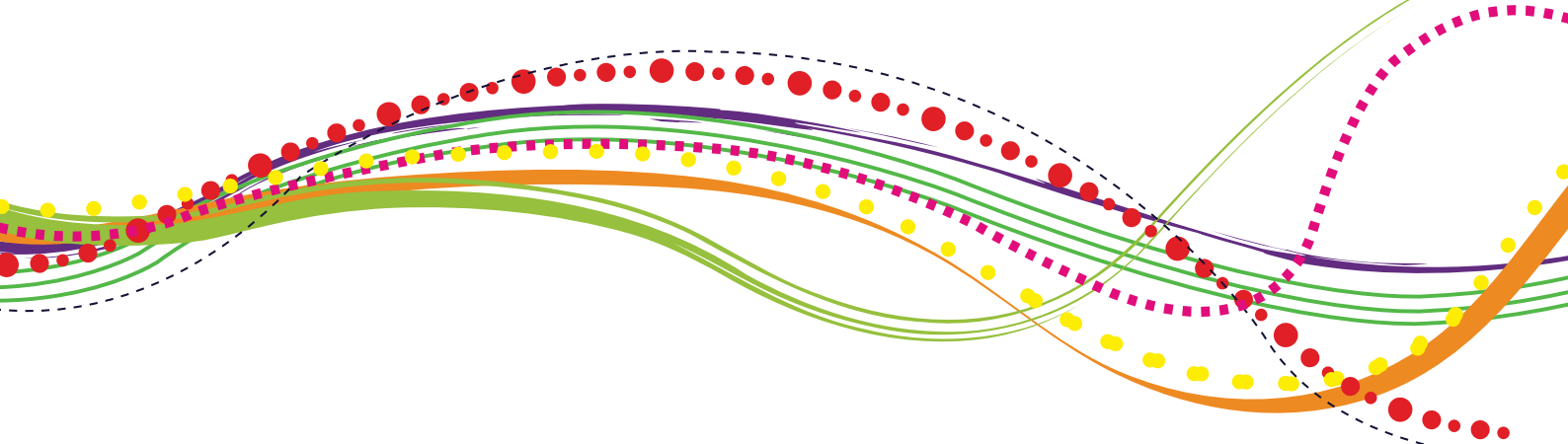


Kirpan – The small ceremonial sword represents compassion, freedom, protection of life, victory, dignity and honour. It is worn by Sikhs as a reminder to fight injustice and oppression.



Kachera – The Sikh undergarment is a symbol of fidelity and signifies self-respect and a commitment to control lust and not indulge in extra marital affairs.

- These articles should not be removed from a Sikh patient without permission.



- A Sikh may experience significant embarrassment if asked to remove these articles in public.
- A Sikh's turban is considered part of the articles of faith, and has similar religious significance. It is a symbol of a Sikh's honour and should be treated with the same level of respect as any of the five articles of faith.

Removal of hair

Hair should not be removed from any part of a Sikh patient's body without consent from the patient or their substitute decision-maker (this is usually a family member)⁵.

If a Sikh patient has impaired capacity and their condition is such that their life and health are at risk, and there is no time to obtain consent, medical treatment to avert the threat to life should be carried out without delay. The cutting of any hair should be avoided unless urgent or life-threatening medical treatment cannot be carried out without its removal.

If a Sikh patient has capacity for decision-making about health matters and refuses medical treatment on the basis of faith (because their hair can not be removed), these wishes must be followed and the patient informed they may be required to sign a discharge against medical advice certificate.

Queensland Health recommends that Sikh patients who feel strongly about refusing medical treatment on the basis that removing their hair is inconsistent with their faith should complete an Advance Health Directive.

All decision-making in relation to these situations must be documented thoroughly in the patient's record.

Ablution, bathing and cleanliness

- Cleanliness is an important consideration for Sikhs.
- Sikhs follow a ritual of cleanliness and prayer each morning and evening which is set out in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh holy scriptures).
- The morning ritual includes showering, cleaning the teeth and mouth before prayer, and then eating.

- If a patient requires assistance to bathe, health care providers should be aware of the patient's preferred timing for this ritual.
- Washing the hands before eating is important as cleanliness is observed during meals.
- Sikhs are required to wash with water after defecation.

Dietary needs

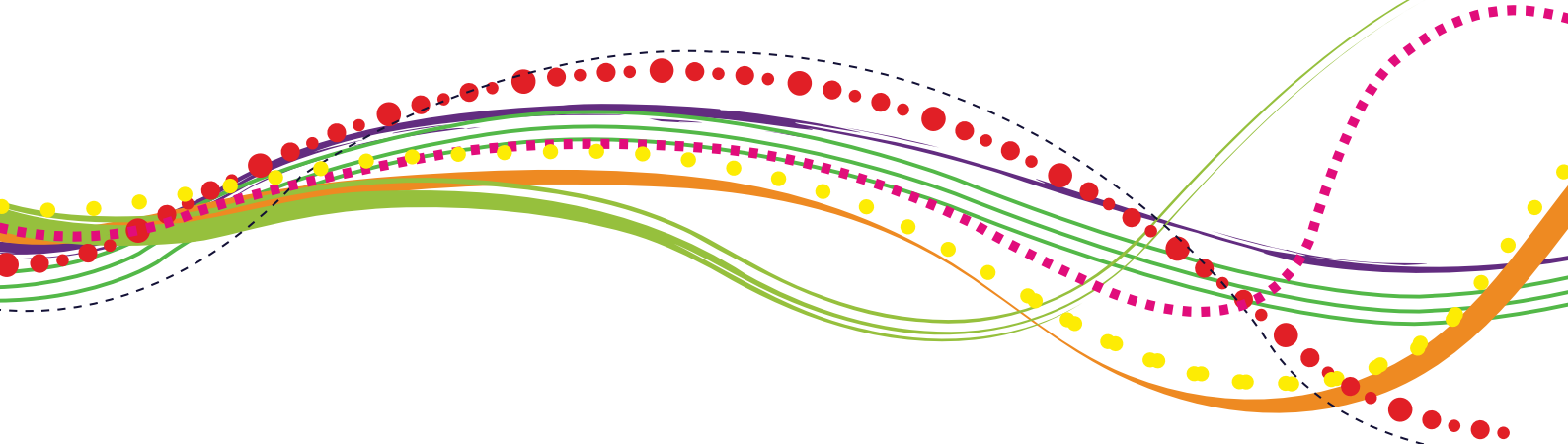
- Many Sikhs are strict vegetarians abstaining from all meat, fish and eggs. However, vegetarian Sikhs do consume dairy products.
- Some Sikhs do not follow a vegetarian diet. Non-vegetarian Sikhs may choose to not eat beef or pork⁶.
- Non-vegetarian Sikhs are not permitted to eat any meat that has been ritually slaughtered, and should not be offered *halal* or *kosher* meals⁷.
- A Sikh patient's family may wish to provide meals prepared at home.

Refer to section three for a table of foods suitable for vegetarian Sikhs.

Prayer

- Prayer is an important part of the daily routine of most Sikhs.
- Sikhs pray to seek God's help in recovering from illness. They remember *Waheguru* (God's name) to obtain peace and ask for forgiveness.
- Sikh patients may wish to recite or listen to *Gurbani* (sacred hymns) which are God's word uttered through the Sikh Gurus and enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib*.
- Sikh patients may request for *Kirtan* (sacred music) to be played at the bedside.
- Prayers are usually said at dawn before breakfast, in the afternoon before sunset, and at night before sleep.
- Prayer can take place in any location, including in bed or in hospital prayer rooms.
- Sikh patients may wish to have a prayer book with them when in hospital. The prayer book is usually covered with a piece of cloth and should be kept in a





clean place above the height of the bed. Hands should be washed before handling any prayer book.

- Many Sikhs have a strong belief that prayer and faith are important elements of curing illnesses of the body and mind⁷.

5. Sikh names

- Sikh men take the surname Singh (lion) and Sikh women take the surname Kaur (princess).
- Some Sikhs in Australia also choose to include a family name in addition to, or instead of, Singh or Kaur.
- Sikh first names are not gender specific.
- The surname Singh does not necessarily indicate that someone is of the Sikh faith.

6. Decision making

Sikhs view the needs of an individual in the greater context of the family.

A Sikh patient's family may have a strong influence on decision making relating to health matters, including informed consent to various medical procedures.

7. Administration of medicines

Traditional medicines and remedies

Sikhs may use a variety of traditional medicines and remedies, often in conjunction with Australian medicine.

Herb and plant products have traditionally played an important role in treating illnesses in India and continue to feature prominently today, including in communities in Australia.

Suitability of medicines

Some medicines may not be suitable for Sikh patients because they contain alcohol or are of animal origin.

The *Queensland Health Guideline on Medicines/ Pharmaceutical Products of Animal Origin* states that health care providers should inform patients about the origins of their proposed medication if it is derived from animals and no suitable synthetic alternative

exists. Patients should be encouraged to make informed decisions regarding their treatment.

http://qheps.health.qld.gov.au/medicines/documents/general_policies/prods_anim_origin.pdf

The manufacturer's *product information* gives details about the composition of the medicine (i.e. listing the active and inactive constituents/ingredients) and provides a description of how the medicine was produced (e.g. whether manufacture of the product included exposure to animal derived materials).

8. Clinical examination and procedures

- Health care providers should ask for permission from the patient or their family before removing any of the five articles of faith, including removing hair from any part of the body, or a Sikh's turban⁵.
- Sikh patients (both men and women) may prefer to be examined by a health care provider of their own gender.
- The need for invasive examinations may need to be carefully explained, particularly where a same-sex clinician cannot be accommodated.
- Sikh patients may wish to have a family member present during any clinical examination.

9. Maternity services

- As soon as practical after childbirth, a family member may wish to perform a special ceremony.
- As part of the ceremony, the infant is given a few drops of holy water and a prayer is recited.
- Sikh mothers may wish to keep the five articles of faith on at all times during childbirth. This may require keeping the *Kachera* (undergarment) on one leg.
- Shaving of the perineum may not be acceptable.
- Infants are usually named soon after birth following a ceremony at the temple or at home.
- Male infants are not circumcised.
- More information about the pregnancy and birth practices of people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background is contained in the Queensland Health *Multicultural Clinical Support Resource*.
www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/support_tools/mcsr.asp

10. Community health services

- Tobacco products, other intoxicants or meat products should not be taken into Sikh homes.
- Sikhs may prefer for shoes to be removed when entering a home.
- If this is not possible for Workplace Health and Safety reasons, alternatives should be explored.

11. Visiting arrangements

- Visiting the sick is an important cultural and religious practice for Sikhs⁴.
- Sikh patients may have large numbers of visitors, including those from outside their immediate family.

12. Care of family and older persons

- It is traditionally the responsibility of children to care for ageing parents⁶.
- Older Sikhs may live together with extended family.
- Sikhism encourages family members to take an active role in the care of family members.
- Health care providers should take this into account when developing care plans or suggesting nursing or residential care.





13. End of life issues

- The sanctity of life is considered paramount in Sikhism⁸.
- Sikhs believe that all living beings have an eternal soul which passes through successive cycles of birth and rebirth⁹.
- Health care providers should include family members when discussing advance care planning with the patient.
- Sikhs may wish to recite prayers or read scriptures when nearing death. Family and friends may wish to be present.
- Holy Water from the *Gurdwara* (Sikh temple) may be given to the patient to sip.
- Sikh chaplaincy services are available in many Queensland Health facilities.

Refer to section three for a list of Sikh organisations.

14. Deceased patients

- Health care providers should not remove the five articles of faith or the turban after death⁷.
- The patient's family should be advised if it is necessary to remove these items.
- A Sikh's body should be covered with clean linen and shrouded.
- The family may wish to wash and clothe the body immediately after death.
- The family may wish to move the body to a funeral home for cremation as soon as possible.
- The family may wish to wait for a close relative or a *Granthi* (Sikh priest) to arrive before moving the body.

15. Autopsy

- There are no Sikh religious objections to autopsy⁸. However, as no hair on the body should be cut or removed, it is usually requested that an autopsy is not performed unless required under Queensland law.
- If an autopsy is required, the five articles of faith, including hair from any part of the body, should not be removed.