

Family and Community

Many Australians come from societies where the community is more important than the individual. There are a number of different family structures ranging from the grandmother taking the role of head of household to young boys being responsible for older female siblings. This may be a function of the culture, but it may also be due to circumstances created by restrictions in family members able to migrate.

It is important to ascertain the family roles of both the patient and support people. This is particularly necessary because decision-making, receiving and disclosure of news to the patient, and orchestration of care may not be individual but group responsibilities.

Some patients may wish to have relatives or friends accompany them for support and to relieve anxiety at all stages of the hospital experience. Families play an important role in decreasing isolation and increasing hope for the patient. Faith in the supporter can be a very important addition to faith in the healer. Very often, the family needs to be involved in

discussions and treatment. This may be to a greater extent than you may expect. Communication with the family is very important. Check out if the patient is comfortable with family members being present, and if so, whenever possible, allow members of the family to accompany the person, and if this not possible, explain tactfully why.

Visiting the sick person is a must in many cultures, and large numbers of visitors may arrive. Be sensitive to the importance of this, particularly if it is necessary to restrict the number of visitors at any one time.

It is also worthy of note that "family" means different things to different cultures.

Be sensitive to who is considered to be immediate family, and next of kin. Also a number of patients have no family in Australia, so friends may play the role of relatives. Ask the patient who they would like to know about their situation, and the level of detail.

Do not assume that the family is always supportive - there can be conflicts within the family, either interpersonal or with respect to treatment, management and care of a particular illness. It may be possible occasionally to involve community members in the care of a patient and family - ask if the patient would like to speak to someone from their own community (see the Resources section for contact numbers of selected community organisations).

