



WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCY?

- **THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HEALTH DISPARITIES, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE**

As the United States becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, health care professionals will need to respond to patients' varied perspectives, values, beliefs and behaviors around their health care. Today, primary care physicians can expect more than 40 percent of their patients to be from minority cultures. A failure to appropriately understand as well as manage these differences may significantly impact health outcomes for these groups.

A growing body of evidence suggests that communication challenges may, in part, contribute to inequities in health outcomes among minorities. Cultural health beliefs may affect how patients think and feel about their health problems and their attitudes toward lifestyle changes and treatment advice. Cultures differ in their styles of communication, in the meaning of words and gestures and even what can be discussed regarding the body, health and illness. Providing health care services that are respectful and responsive to the health beliefs, practices and cultural needs of diverse patients may help to improve health care outcomes.

National medical organizations are embracing the importance of cultural competency in health care. The American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Medical Association are among the many medical societies that have launched initiatives to improve cultural competency and to help health care professionals advance their care of minority patients. Additionally, the organization for future physicians, the American Medical Student Association, offers extensive resources and clear, easy-to-understand tips on how health care professionals can improve their cultural competency.

- **WHAT CAN HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS DO TO IMPROVE CULTURAL COMPETENCY?**

Simply understanding and being sensitive to a patient's unique background and ethnicity is an important first step for health care professionals to be more culturally competent.

Below are tips for health care professionals to help improve their cultural competence:

- **Don't assume that the patient would want to be treated in the same manner you would want to be treated.**
 - The patient's specific culture will determine the rules for appropriate behavior and will construct the patient's concept of a good relationship.
- **Take a more formal approach with patients who were born in another culture.**
 - In most countries, there is a greater distance between health care professionals and patients.
 - It's best to use the patient's last name when addressing him or her unless you're treating a child.

- **Don't be insulted if the patient fails to make eye contact or ask questions about treatment.**
 - In many cultures, caregivers are considered authority figures and it is disrespectful to look directly at them or to make them “lose face” by asking questions.
- **Don't assume you know about the patient's ideas on maintaining health, the cause of illness or how to prevent or cure illness.**
 - Use a line of questioning that will help to uncover some of the patient's core beliefs about prevention, health and illness.
- **Allow the patient to be open and honest with you.**
 - Don't discount beliefs different to those held by our Western biomedical tradition. Patients are often afraid to tell Western health care professionals about visits to a folk healer or alternative medicines they take concurrently with Western treatment.

For more information and tips visit:

- American Medical Student Association
<http://www.amsa.org/>
- American Academy of Family Physicians
<http://www.aafp.org/>
- American Medical Association
<http://www.ama-assn.org/>
- US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health
<http://www.omhrc.gov/>

We hope that you found Time to Talk CARDIO a useful tool in having productive visits with your patients. We have a large library of videos to help you continue to communicate effectively with your patients. Please visit our web site at www.timetotalkcardio.com.

We look forward to your return visit!

Time to Talk CARDIO is an educational program underwritten by Merck & Co., Inc. and developed in partnership with the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation, Canyon Ranch Institute and RIASWorks.

