



PUGET SOUND QUARTERLY

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End-of-Life Care from an Asian Cultural Perspective

*Jeanette Christianson, RN, OCN
Virginia Mason Medical Center*

As America's Western-based medical system strives to strengthen its hospice services through the education of physicians, other health care providers and patients, minority populations, particularly Asian cultures, seem less eager to embrace this current trend in end-of-life care. Even though 25% of the US population is comprised of minorities, only 17% take advantage of hospice care, only a small portion of which are Asian Americans (Kagawa-Singer & Blackhall, 2001). As this particular minority population group continues to grow in the United States, it is essential that health care providers examine the cultural differences that create a seeming reluctance by Asian cultures to use hospice services (Clark, 1983).

An examination of the cultural values and beliefs of Asian patients as they pertain to their views on health care and end of life care will render valuable insight for health care professionals in understanding their unique needs thus enabling them to experience the best possible outcomes when dealing with a terminal illness and/or end-of-life issues.

Religion is a key component in shaping cultural beliefs and practices among any given population. The Asian culture is no exception. Although there is religious diversity as in any culture, some religions have particularly influenced the Asian culture over the course of his-



tory. Buddhism is probably the most influential of the Eastern religions.

Andresen (2001) states illness in the Buddhist religion is viewed as something to be endured, a part of your destiny dictated by the gods and/or a higher being. This can translate into a reluctance to seek medical care and may manifest in a stoicism contributing to a lower use of pain medications and comfort care. Ancestral worship, which is also an integral part of the Asian belief system, can influence how the end-of-life process is viewed. How one dies in

this life directly influences the spirit in the afterlife.

Proper care of the dying is of paramount importance when one believes that the spirit of the deceased can also influence the lives of those remaining behind (Sagara & Pickett, 1998). Superstitions are also worth mentioning as a major influence in the Asian belief system. One such superstition that often directly affects the discussion of end of life issues is the belief that speaking of death is bad luck. It is thought that talking about death will beget death

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