

Respecting culture near the end of life

“ In New Zealand, as in several other countries, death is ‘conspicuous mainly by its relative absence’ in the medical curriculum.¹ Nevertheless, palliative care practitioners are attempting to influence the way people there are cared for.

Good quality care has been characterised as being tailored to each individual and family, focused on them and related to their needs, provided through the presence of a caring relationship by staff who demonstrate involvement, commitment and concern.² Caring has behavioural and motivational elements; it has physical manifestations but also psychological, spiritual and social dimensions. ‘It is of great importance to the dying to feel that their cultural needs, values and practices are understood, accommodated and affirmed by those caring for them,’ according to Schwass.³

Nurses in New Zealand, for example, are trained to respect the cultures of all the people they care for through *Te Kawa Whakaruruhau*, a cultural safety programme designed by Maori.⁴ In other areas, learning from patients has been identified over the years as key to the provision of effective care.⁵ However, we still need to ensure that we identify difference in culture and practices as something that we must ourselves learn about and teach to those we expect to continue this work. In countries where cultures are blending and evolving, we need to ask people from those cultures what we should know in order to care effectively for the dying.

In 1987, the New Zealand government published a guide for healthcare practitioners, *The undiscover’d country: customs of the cultural and ethnic groups of New Zealand concerning death and dying*.⁶ Over the past two decades, New Zealand, like other countries, has become truly multicultural. For the majority of the past two centuries, it predominantly observed only two traditions of death and dying, Maori and Pakeha (European). *Last words: approaches to death in New Zealand’s cultures and faiths* outlines 19 cultures and at least 14 faiths or denominations in relation to death and dying practices and customs.³ These numbers may

seem small compared to those in some European communities, but as New Zealand has become increasingly diverse in its population only the larger communities are represented.

Within each of these cultures there are widespread variations in practices and customs. In a country where the Maori, the *tangata whenua* (the people of the land, the hosts), lived before colonisation, it is not possible, for example, to identify practices that suit *all* Maori. ‘Illness, dying, death and grieving are a central part of Maori life: formal rituals and practices are elaborate ... *karakia* (invocations) and *waiata* (chants and songs) are symbolic and poetic, encouraging emotions to be openly expressed’.⁷ However, to get it right we must ask what to do and how to help.

To optimise our care, then, we must ensure that social and cultural aspects of life and death are identified, embraced and understood by health professionals so that the needs of patients, and their families, are met as they approach death. Planning and preparation will ensure that practitioners understand different cultural perceptions of dying and death and respect patients’ belief systems and cultural norms.

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Further reading

- DeSpelder LA, Strickland AL. *The last dance: encountering death and dying*, 7th edn. Boston; London: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
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