

The following is an excellent resource to share with hospital personnel.

RESPECTING AMERICAN INDIAN PEOPLE IN THE HOSPITAL SETTING

by Marcia Rainey, R.N.

Many American Indians are mixed-blood. People of mixed races may have any skin tone and hair color. Refrain from asking questions such as “How much Indian are you?” Culturally there is a wide range from traditional to fully assimilated. Most fall somewhere in between.

Traditionally Indian people teach by demonstration & learn by observation rather than the question/answer method. If asked the same question over & over may start to give silly answers or avoid answering.

For some making eye contact is disrespectful. Don't take lack of eye contact as a sign of inattention or disinterest.

May keep items (things that assist with prayers) hidden – afraid staff will ask questions or take away. May have one or more items at bedside – respectfully observe, don't question and don't touch without permission. Possible items: medicine bag or pouch, medicine bundle, feathers, tobacco, cedar, sweet grass, sage. Just as you would not bother the Rosary Beads of a Catholic patient, you should not bother the items that an American Indian patient has to assist with prayers.

Medicine bags (pouches) and medicine bundles are very private, contents very personal. They contain items of spiritual significance to that person – not medicine to be taken internally. (Possible items: a rock, a marble, a grain of corn, bean seeds, tobacco, sage, a feather, sweet grass, cedar, corn meal).

In Mental Health Facilities & Prison settings where security is essential acknowledge the importance of the items to the individual and give choices in a respectful manner as you explain that the security rules are for everyone's safety. For instance, give the choice of having a medicine bag searched (looked inside of) or placed in storage to be returned on discharge. Another choice could be to have an empty medicine bag into which 4 acceptable items are placed (probably a small amount of tobacco, cedar, sweet grass, & sage).

Connectedness. Some think a holistic approach to life is a fairly new concept. Compartmentalizing life is a foreign concept to Indian peoples. Traditional healers (sometimes called medicine man or woman) are also spiritual leaders. The physical, mental & spiritual are inseparable. Healing is a balance of body, mind & spirit and does not always mean “cure”.

An Indian healer may ask about doing a “smudging” (a cleansing/purification ceremony). Ceremonial tobacco, cedar, sweet grass &/or sage are used. (This is somewhat comparable to incense in the Catholic Church). They are aware that it may not be allowed due to dangers of Oxygen & No Smoking regulations. Could be done outdoors (if the patient can go outside). A smokeless smudging could be done with a small cedar branch, or feather. Spring water is sometimes also used. The healer may also use a hand drum or shaker & sing.

An Indian healer will never call himself or herself a healer, or a Medicine Man or Woman. This title will be used by those who know them. They will only do ceremonies after permission is given by an elder. It is considered very improper & disrespectful to decide on one's own to conduct Indian ceremonies.

Music can be very “good medicine”. May have tapes or CDs of flute or drum, etc.