



Cultural Competency

Aboriginal peoples' experiences with the mainstream health care system can bring into play multiple issues rooted in cultural differences. These can act as barriers to meaningful exchange. Encouraging "cultural competence" in health care providers can help ensure a more responsive health care system.

What is Cultural Competence?

Cultural competence can be defined as a "set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs, 1989, 28).

A culturally competent health care system is one that acknowledges and incorporates, at all levels of policy and practice, the importance of culture, continuous self-assessment of cross cultural relations, vigilance toward the dynamics of cultural difference, ongoing development of cultural knowledge, and adaptation of resources and services to meet culturally unique needs (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Ananeh-Firempong, 2003).

Why is it important?

Cultural competence is widely recognized by health policy makers, administrators, practitioners, academics, and consumers as a key strategy to eliminate socio-economic, cultural, and racial/ethnic disparities in health and health

care (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Ananeh-Firempong, 2003).

Culturally competent care can help to reduce the barriers to effective health utilization including access and uptake of health services and resources. Similarly, it can improve patient-provider communication, treatment, and health outcomes (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Ananeh-Firempong, 2003).

Stages of Development

Cultural competence is a lifelong learning process. As cultures evolve, so too must the competencies required to effectively work in cross cultural settings. Understanding the stages of development is important to culturally competent policy and practice.

Stage 1: Cultural awareness is the self examination and in-depth exploration of one's own cultural and professional background including one's biases, prejudices, and assumptions about individuals who are different (Campinha-Bacote, 2002).

Stage 2: Cultural sensitivity is about recognizing and respecting difference and the socio-economic, environmental, and historical processes and current context that contribute to it, for example, the impact of colonization on loss of language (KāhuiTautoko Consulting, 2008).

Stage 3: Cultural safety is the empowerment of clients/patients to incorpo-





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rate their culture into their own care and wellbeing to the extent that they feel culturally safe before, during and after receiving health services (KāhuiTautoko Consulting, 2008).

Stage 4: Cultural competent people are able to apply their knowledge about other cultures to changing or improving their practices in a way that positively influences health outcomes (KāhuiTautoko Consulting, 2008).

Culturally competent practitioners help ensure that the system as a whole is in the best cultural position possible to respond correctly when the need arises. **Cultural responsiveness**, in turn, fosters **culturally appropriate** behaviors, systems, and policies that match the specific needs and circumstances of clients regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, social or economic status and geography (KāhuiTautoko Consulting, 2008).

Culturally safe clients feel respected, involved and engaged in their own care and have a significantly higher degree of satisfaction with the health care system as a result.

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