Culture and Clinical Care for Haitians During Time of Crisis January 12, 2010 Earthquake

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Haitian Flag

- The **flag of Haiti** was adopted on February 25, 1987. The flag is divided into two horizontal **rectangles**. The top half is **blue** and the bottom is **red**. Since 1843 the flag for official and state use has had the **coat of arms of Haiti** on a white panel in the center. The coat of arms depicts a trophy of weapons ready to defend freedom, and a royal palm for independence. The palm is topped by the Cap of Liberty. The national motto is on a white scroll reading L'Union Fait La Force ("Unity Makes Strength"). Haitian Flag Day is celebrated on the 18th of May.
Spiritual/ Religious Orientation

- **Primary religious/spiritual afflictions**
  - Catholicism
  - In the 1970’s 15-20% Protestant
  - Voodoo is an important religious component; a sleep enhanced communication with ancestors, saints or deities.

- **Usual religious/spiritual practices**
  - Holy Communion, pray rosary, belief in sacraments
  - Believe in power of prayer to physically heal
  - Very fearful of sacrament of the sick, link with death
  - In Voodoo Haitians gather to worship deities or spirits (*loa*) whom they believe receive their power from God.
Spiritual/ Religious Orientation

• **Use of spiritual healing/ healers**
  - Female Voodoo Priests (*mambo*) and Male Voodoo Priests (*hougan*) are practitioners of black magic (*bokors*)
  - Believers seek these practitioners when they must worship the spirits to be relieved of illness. Also maintaining relationships believed to be a form of protection from harm.
Spiritual/ Religious Orientation

- Holidays
  - Carnival (last a week), Good Friday to Easter
  - Independence Day (January 1\textsuperscript{st})
  - Ancestors Day (January 2\textsuperscript{nd})
  - Agriculture and Labor Day (May 1\textsuperscript{st})
  - Flag Day (May 18\textsuperscript{th})
  - death of Jean-Jacques Dessalines (October 17\textsuperscript{th})
  - Battle of Vertieres Day (November 18\textsuperscript{th})
Haiti has an oral culture with a long tradition of proverbs, jokes and stories reflecting on Philosophy which has been used as a teaching tool to pass on unwritten knowledge.

Haitians are frequently considered in the African American Culture.
COMMUNICATION

• Major languages and dialects
  – Creole is the National language spoken by entire population of Haitian descent
  – French is also spoken by educated residents

• Greetings
  – Informal- embrace and kiss is a sign of affection and acceptance
  – Formal- handshake greetings usually composed and stern
  – Gender- men do not embrace women, even if that are friends, a handshake is polite
  – Friends address each other by first name and family by nicknames
  – Healthcare providers should address patients of their family by “Mr.”, “Mrs.”, “Ms.” or “Dr.”
  – Children refer to adult friends as “Auntie” or “Uncle”
COMMUNICATION

- **Tone of Voice**
  - Intonation conveys emotions. Pitch is high or low depending on message.
  - Tone expresses joy or sadness, happiness of deceit
  - Haitians are very expressive and tend to be loud

- **Direct/Indirect Style of Speech**
  - Generally direct except in personal of religious matters
  - With healthcare worker reserved and polite
  - Communication with friends animated and lively
  - Agree even when they disagree to avoid conflict with a person of perceived higher authority

- **Use of Interpreters**
  - Generally mistrust interpreters, prefer to use family members rather than friends to maintain confidentiality
  - In the absence of family prefer to use professional interpreter with whom they have no relationship and will probably not see again
COMMUNICATION

- Serious or Terminal Illness
  - Expressed as, “I am very sick” (*Moin malad anpil*) meaning in critical condition or I will never be well again (*Moin pap refe*) meaning terminal and death is imminent
  - Haitians inform designated family member first. That family member informs the patient whether he/she thinks treatment, surgery etc. is necessary
  - Haitians generally fear abdominal surgery
COMMUNICATION

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

• Literacy Assessment
  – 80% of Haitian neither read nor write
  – Health Education materials should be visual or oral
  – Illiteracy rate for Haitians in US is also high
  – Healthcare professionals can assess literacy by offering to clarify information
  – Directly asking the patient if they can read or write is embarrassing and may make the patient reluctant to ask for assistance

• Consents
  – Haitians may not want to know about the procedure and just trust “the expert”
  – To obtain consent the clinician needs to clearly indicate the importance of a procedure and the absolute need for consent
  – Clinicians should ask a family member to be present throughout the interaction
COMMUNICATION

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION
Uneducated Haitians do not generally show their lack of knowledge to non-Haitians. They tend to be more comfortable with people who do not speak English and are also islanders.

- **Eye Contact**
  - Traditional persons avoid eye contact with authority figures to avoid insolence
  - Acculturated adults make eye contact with each other but children may avoid eye contacts with adults

- **Personal Space**
  - Interactions are very close 1-2 feet with family and friends
  - Keep comfortable distance with healthcare providers
  - Adults prefer not to share space with children, believing that children should not be within hearing distance of adult conversations
COMMUNICATION

- **Use and Meaning of Silence**
  - Usually signals disappointment, disapproval and possible disagreement

- **Gestures**
  - Haitians use many hand gestures while talking. There are no particular gestures that may lead to misunderstanding.

- **Openness and Expressing Emotions**
  - Will not express emotions unless trusting relationship
  - Among family and friends, hand gestures generally accompany animated and loud conversation as a means of reinforcement
  - May cry if something really bothers them or express fear of the unknown or of procedure and test outcomes
  - To express major disapproval, may fold arms across their chest, roll their eyes, or look away up at the ceiling
COMMUNICATION

• Touch
  – Haitians freely touch family and friends. May touch healthcare providers to let them know they are being spoken to. Appreciate providers’ supportive touch.

• Orientation to Time
  – Not committed to time or schedule. Perception of time is flexible.
  – May be on time for medical appointments if health care providers has emphasized the importance of punctuality
  – Haitians from poor backgrounds are more past and present oriented; those who are educated and considered upper-class tend to present and future oriented
ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIVING (ADLs)

• Modesty
  – Both genders are very modest
  – Men are embarrassed to wear hospital gowns
  – Gender important in health care interactions: Physicians should be male, nurses female
  – Haitian highly respect and trust both physicians and nurses. Although puzzled by male nurses, they accept care provided by the opposite gender

• Skin Care
  – Shower daily, preferably in the morning. Women perform thorough peri-care with soap and water before bedtime

• Hair Care
  – Use oil-based pomade to replenish scalp and keep hair from drying. Men shampoo daily while showering.
ADLs

- Toileting
  - Insist on using bathroom, as privacy is very important.
  - If family member can assist, patient may use bedpan or urinal.

- Self care
  - During initial stages of illness, family members want to help with patient’s hygiene, due to privacy.
  - The family will wait for directions regarding the care they should provide.
  - Patients want to be clean, feel clean, and smell clean.
  - Haitians fear surgery; patients limit self-care activities, believing that any physical strain may negatively affect their bodies. Clinician must strongly encourage them to contribute an effort to avoid complications.
FOOD PRACTICES

• Meal Pattern
  – Lunch is typically the largest meal.
  – Breakfast consist of bread with butter and coffee
  – Dinner is soup or hot cereal. Some Haitians have adjusted to U.S. routines.

• Food beliefs and rituals
  – Haitians believe that exposing the body to an imbalance of “hot” (cho) and “cold” (fret) factors cause illness.
  – Haitians also assess food in terms of heavy or light qualities;
    • One should eat heavy foods during the day to provide energy for work
    • One should eat light foods for dinner because they are easily digested.
    • Method of preparation is also important
FOOD PRACTICES

• Usual diet
  – In hospital, prefer fasting to eating non-Haitian food—afraid such food may make them more sick
  – Prefer rice, beans, plantains (boiled/fried), spicy meat with gravy or stewed vegetable
  – Haitians generally do not eat yogurt, cottage cheese, or runny egg yolks

• Fluids
  – Drink lots of water and homemade fruit juice, coffee in the morning and tea only when ill

• Hospitality
  – Haitians are very hospitable. Welcome guests to their home with food, refusal of which is impolite.
  – May off child’s bed if guest stays overnight
  – Family offers most comfortable space to guest.
SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT

- Pain (*doule*)
  - Haitians can use numerical scales for symptoms if the scales are explained.
  - Have very low threshold. Whole demeanor changes
  - Usually very vague about location of pain, believing that whole body is affected; because disease travels, location of pain not important
  - Prefer injections (adults). In lieu of injections, order of preference is elixir, tablets, and capsules.
  - Accept alternatives pain treatments.
SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT

- **Fatigue**
  - Haitians think fatigue signals a physical weakness known as *febles*, caused by anemia or insufficient blood.
  - Generally attribute symptoms to poor diet.
  - Patient may suggest a need for special care—eating well, taking vitamins, and resting.

- **Depression**
  - Stigma attached to mental illness is so strong that Haitians do not readily admit to depression.
  - According to voodoo, depression indicates possession by malevolent spirits or is punishment for not honoring good, protective spirits.
  - Also may view depression as a hex put on someone by a jealous or envious person.
  - Clinicians need to be sensitive to root cause of problem and ascertain need for comfort within particular religious beliefs.
  - Clinicians may want to summon priest or pastor if depression is related to something spiritual.
  - If depression severe, patient accepts therapy with caution.
SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT

• Self-care symptoms management
  – Haitians try home remedies first; at the outset, clinician should ask about them and herbal treatments
  – Patient may gauge his/her symptoms and institute treatment based on another Haitian’s experience with them same illness
  – Haitians consider health to be a personal responsibility, so patient may tell clinician what illness has rather than describe symptoms, and confirmation of self-diagnosis
DEVELOPMENTAL and SEXUAL ISSUES

• Celebration of menarche or becoming a man
  – No special rituals. Caution girls about their fertility and risk of having sex. Boys are free to explore and initiate sexual activity.

• Attitudes about birth control
  – Inappropriate and undesirable. Consider children to be a blessing from God.

• Attitudes about sexually transmitted disease (STD) and condoms
  – Very sensitive and suspicious about topic
  – Males resent condom use, believing that condoms reduce sexual pleasure
DEVELOPMENTAL and SEXUAL ISSUES

- Sexual Orientation
  - Homosexuality outlawed within Haitian culture. Gay and lesbian person remain closeted. Haitians do not acknowledge or discuss homosexual relationships.
FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- Caring Role
  - Women are generally responsible for care. Haitians expect to project an image of strength and not display emotion.

- Expectations for Children
  - Expect children to be respectful, caring, and obedient, and to become self-sufficient and competent at an early age
  - Both parents provide emotional care, but mothers take care of the day-to-day task of raising children in a highly protective, secure environment.
  - Expect children to be high achievers, especially in education.
  - May send children to boarding school

- Expectation for Elders
  - Highly respect elders.
  - Small percentage reluctantly decide to place elders in nursing homes.
ILLNESS BELIEFS

- Cause of/attitudes about physical illness
  - Haitians have a fatalistic view of illness
  - Perceive illness as punishment
  - Natural illness
  - Supernatural illness is very serious; fright (sezisman)
ILLNESS BELIEFS

- Causes and attitudes on mental illness
  - Highly stigmatized and shameful for the family
  - Haitians believe that mental illness has a supernatural cause; hex
  - Accept treatment and hospitalization only in cases of severe mental problems

- Causes of defects
  - Angry spirits cause physical deformity
  - People with a genetic defect are viewed as a curse on the family
  - Receive care at home and sometimes are hidden from society
ILLNESS BELIEFS

- Attitudes about disabilities
  - View a disable child as punishment or as a condition caused by a supernatural force.
  - Mother feels extremely guilty
  - Disabled family members are loved, sheltered and cared for at home

- Sick role
  - Assume passive role and allows others to care for him/her. All family members participate in providing care.
ILLNESS BELIEFS

• Home and Folk remedies
  – Usually a first line of treatment
  – It includes tea, massage, hot bath with boiled leaves
  – Such medications may consist of roots, leaves, and products made in Europe

• Medications
  – Some Haitians stop taking prescription medicine when symptoms subside, rather than continuing full course
  – Barriers to medications include lack of health insurance and affordability
DEATH RITUALS

• Beliefs and Attitudes about death
  – Haitians greatly fear and misunderstand death
  – Death of an elderly person is more acceptable than death of a young person

• Home vs. Hospital
  – Generally prefer to be cared for, and die at home

• Care of Body
  – Family member give deceased a final bath
  – Cremation is unacceptable, because of deep respect for the body and their belief in resurrection and paradise
  – Organ donation is neither acknowledge nor encouraged
DEATH RITUALS

- Attitudes about autopsy
  - If Haitians suspect foul play or an unnatural death, they request an autopsy
  - Haitians consider zombification the supreme punishment
  - Voodoo evolved to counteract zombification
Any Questions?