

Cultural Competency in the Mormon Community

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The federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) define cultural competency as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations. 'Culture' refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. 'Competence' implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual and an organization within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by consumers and their communities." (More on this can be found at www.hrsa.gov/culturalcompetence/#assessment). Cultural competency is an important part of minimizing barriers to care and promoting access to acupuncture and other types of health care.

United States' trend statistics show that the Mormon Church is one of the fastest growing religious traditions in our country. The Mormon Church began in 1830 with just six members, primarily its founder Joseph Smith Jr. and his family.

Mormons follow a code of health, called the "Word of Wisdom," that is rooted in preventative medicine and encourages the use of natural substances. This may explain why the use of acupuncture and herbs can be very popular among Mormon communities. The Word of Wisdom (contained in Section 89 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*) proclaims that alcohol, tobacco and hot drinks (meaning black tea and coffee) are not to be used. It goes on to say:

"All wholesome herbs God hath ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man--

"Every herb in the season thereof, and every fruit in the season thereof;

"Flesh...of beasts and of the fowls of the air...are to be used sparingly;

"All grain is ordained for the use of man...to be the staff of life...

"All grain is good for the food of man; as also the fruit of the vine." (*Doctrine and Covenants* 89:10-12, 14, 16)

Following the Word of Wisdom is spiritual law and results in blessings bestowed. However, failure to do so has religious consequences. Acupuncture and Chinese herbs can be very helpful in assisting Mormons to treat symptoms and illness while remaining true to their health code.

Elke Parsons, MS, LAc, LMT, is an acupuncturist and herbalist in the Salt Lake City area with a practice that is overflowing with patients who identify themselves as Latter Day Saint (LDS) Mormons.

Q: Was working with the Mormon community always a vision of yours? How did this come about?

A: No, I never imagined that I would be living in Utah or working with the Mormon people. But when I made the decision to move here, I understood that it was likely I would be treating members of the Mormon community.

Q: Why do you think that acupuncture and herbs are so popular for this community?

A: In the Mormon faith and belief system, using natural means to maintain health is a priority. The LDS belief system has relied on prevention and maintenance of health since the beginning of its religious practice in the 1800s. In general, the people of Utah are very health conscious. The use of supplements, herbs, massage and chiropractic care is standard here. In fact, a great number of the nation's vitamins and supplements are produced in the state of Utah.

Q: What are some special considerations a practitioner should take when treating a LDS Mormon? Can you explain a bit about "[sacred undergarments](#)" and how a practitioner should work around them?

A: There are no unique or special considerations to make when treating LDS patients. They are people with health care concerns that are no different than those of other patients. When I first began working as an acupuncturist in Utah, I was very nervous that I would offend somebody or say something wrong. I quickly learned that Mormon people are eager to talk about their beliefs and wanted to help me feel comfortable here and with their faith. I have learned so much and continue to learn every day.

Members of the LDS faith wear sacred undergarments after they have received their "endowment" as part of a religious ceremony performed in their temples. Garments are worn day and night by men and women, and serve to protect the saints from evil and also serve to remind them of the commitments they have made in the temple. They are a type of underwear that is always white in color. Most commonly, they are a top and bottom, but some people choose to wear a one-piece garment.

I approach the garments just as I would any other undergarment, by being courteous and respectful of its wearer's personal space and body. If it is necessary to needle an area that is under the garments, I simply ask if we can either move or remove them. It is never an issue. People want what is best for their health and are eager to do what is necessary to meet their health care needs.

Q: If a practitioner wanted to reach out to this community, what would you suggest the first steps might be?

A: Not judging them or making generalized assumptions based on their religion is the best advice I can give.

Q: What have you learned from this community?

A: I have learned so much! Most importantly, I have come to understand that regardless of religion, people are all just people with daily struggles and stressors that can benefit from our medicine. Also, I have learned to simply ask rather than make assumptions, to respect the faith of others, and to be sincere. Working with sincere efforts has been my greatest benefit.

Q: What education have you brought to this community?

A: While the residents of Utah are very health minded, there have not been many licensed acupuncturists in the area. I love to educate my patients about the amazing benefits that Chinese

medicine can provide and the range of illnesses we can successfully treat. I work with a group of women monthly and teach them about seasonal nutrition and acupressure. Because these women all have large families, it has been very beneficial for many members of this community.

Q: I understand that your practice is so busy you would like to bring on another acupuncturist. If someone reading this has an interest in moving to the Salt Lake City area to work with you how should they contact you?

A: They can contact me through my web site: www.elkeparsons.com

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