Principles for Culturally Competent Health Care for Muslim Families and Communities

The most basic aspect of cultural competence relates to the provision of linguistically and culturally appropriate services. Limited provider awareness of Muslim cultural values and religious traditions can be an important factor in the lack of access to culturally competent care. Cultural competence must address cultural and societal barriers to receiving and accessing health services of all types. In particular, providers must learn about and be respectful of the cultural traditions of their Muslim clients. It is important to respect the cultural diversity of Muslims in the US. Be sensitive to their diverse backgrounds and traditions. Be sure to assess the medical, psychological, social, and cultural needs of each patient in order to provide quality care.

Make accommodations for daily prayers.
Physicians should make accommodations for the Muslim patient's daily prayers. Some clinics and hospitals have begun to have prayer rooms for the Muslim patients. Sick patients who are unable to fully prostrate themselves may sit up, or pray from the position they are in if they are unable to move at all. Muslims face southeast (in the US), towards Mecca, during their prayers.

Be aware of the Muslim tradition of fasting during Ramadan. During Ramadan, Muslims must fast from sunrise to sunset. Fasting includes abstaining from all substances, including pharmaceuticals and I.V. drips. However, illness is an exception, and in a life-threatening situation the physician should consult an elder in the family or a leader from the Muslim community to persuade the patient of the necessary treatment.

Learn about the Islamic dietary code.
Islamic law has a strict dietary code, much like Orthodox Judaism. Permissible food (halal) follows standards of preparation. All kosher food is acceptable as halal. Halal is an Arabic word meaning lawful or permitted. The opposite of Halal is haram, which means unlawful or prohibited. Halal and haram are universal terms that apply to all facets of life … these terms may be used in relation to food products, meat products, cosmetics, personal care products, food ingredients, and food contact materials. While many things are clearly Halal or clearly haram, there are some things that are not clear.
These items are considered questionable or suspect and more information is needed to categorize them as Halal or haram. Such items are often referred to as Mashbooh, which means doubtful or questionable. All foods are considered Halal except the following, which are haram:

- Swine/pork and its by-products
- Animals improperly slaughtered or dead before slaughtering
- Animals killed in the name of anyone other than ALLAH (God)
- Alcohol and intoxicants
- Carnivorous animals, birds of prey and land animals without external ears
- Blood and blood by-products
- Foods contaminated with any of the above products

Foods containing ingredients such as gelatin, enzymes, emulsifiers, etc. are questionable (Mashbooh) because the origin of these ingredients is not known. Consumption of alcohol and pork is prohibited. Animal shortening, gelatin, and lard are also prohibited if originating from pigs. It is important for a physician to note the ingredients in medications, and to avoid prescribing those that contain gelatin (unless specified as beef), other animal products or alcohol. At the same time, Islamic dietary laws allow Muslims to modify the laws to save lives. Preservation of life takes precedence over the Qur'an. 6

Respect the modesty of your female Muslim clients. Islam requires a lifestyle of modesty for both men and women. Modest dress emphasizes the importance of an individual’s mind and contributions to society, rather than physical attributes. Men are required to cover from navel to the knee, and some will wear a small head covering, a kufi. Women wear loose fitting clothing, including a head covering, hijab. Female patients may wear their head covering during hospitalization. A knock on the door before entering the room would give the patient a chance to cover her head.

Let your Muslim patients take the lead in whether to shake hands or not. For some Muslims, handshakes between people who are not related are considered inappropriate according to Islamic custom. However, there are varying degrees of what is acceptable. Some Muslims would expect a handshake, thus the physician should extend a hand but should not be personally offended if the hand is refused. Eye contact is also commonly avoided, especially in mixed-gender situations. (Read more about non-verbal communication.)

Try to provide clients with a health care provider of the same sex. When at all possible it is best to have same sex patient and physician. In cases where an interpreter is required, it is also most appropriate to use someone of the same gender.

Accommodate Islamic traditions about death. Death is an important part of the traditions of the Islamic life cycle. Family members spend the last days of a dying patient’s life special prayers for that person. If the family is unable to come to see the patient, the physician should contact the Imam, the Muslim prayer leader, to counsel the patient. By tradition, family or community members will wash the body of the deceased and bury it as soon as possible. Cremation is not allowed under Islamic law, and embalming should be avoided unless it is required by civil law.