



Caring for the Sikh Patient

Most Sikhs in Britain have come from the state of Punjab in India, or from east Africa. The word Sikh means "disciple" or "follower".

The Sikh religion was founded by a Hindu, **GURU NANAK** in the 16th Century. **AMRITDHARI** (baptised) Sikhs have strict rules of diet, dress, prayer and worship.

SIGNIFICANT TERMS

GURU GRANTH SAHIB - Sikh Holy Book **GURDWARA** - Sikh Temple

GRANTHI - There are no priests in Sikhism. The granthi is the reader appointed and supported by the local community who has the care of the local temple.

NIT-NEM GUTKA - A book of prayers and hymns which some Sikh patients may use for their daily prayers. This must be treated with respect. It is usually wrapped in a cloth and opened only with clean hands. It must not fall to the floor.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

MODESTY - Is very important. Female doctors for female patients wherever possible. For modesty reasons, placing a Sikh patient in a mixed sex bay must be avoided.

DIET - Many Sikhs are vegetarian and beef is forbidden. Some will not eat fish or eggs.

THE FIVE K'S - Are observed by Amritdhari Sikhs:

- **KESH** - Cutting of hair is forbidden. If it is essential, for clinical reasons, to remove body hair it may be more acceptable to use a depilatory cream.
- **KANGA** - The hair is secured with a comb and is always covered.
- **KARA** - A metal bangle is worn on the right wrist. This would usually be taped before an operation. It can only be removed if a procedure is done on the right arm. An MRI scan cannot be performed unless the patient agrees to remove their Kara.
- **KIRPAN** - A short symbolic dagger is also worn. If this must be removed consent must be obtained and agreement reached about where it is kept.
- **KACCHERA** - Undershorts. To remind Sikhs of duties of modesty and sexual purity.

Devout Sikh patients will not wish to remove these completely. When changing they usually put one foot in the new pair before removing the old. They wear them for showering and then change.

The five K's are **SACRED** and cannot be disturbed unless absolutely necessary.

PRAYER

Individual practices will vary, so it is important to find out what the patient would find helpful.

JAPJI - Sikh morning prayer. Many devout Sikhs, especially older people, like to wake up early to pray.

REHRAS - Evening prayer, before or after sunset.

Privacy during prayer (e.g. with bed curtains drawn) is appreciated. Because it is important for the Sikh to be physically clean when praying, the patient may at least like to wash their hands and face. If they are bed bound they will need a bowl of water and a towel, and perhaps a cup or jug for pouring the water.

AS DEATH APPROACHES

If the patient has no relatives the local spiritual leader should be contacted. If the patient is close to death the family, sometimes accompanied by the **granthi** pray at the bedside and read from the holy book. Hymns will be recited from the holy book. The patient may also find comfort in the playing of taped hymns and prayers. Privacy is appreciated, and, if possible, a single room would be helpful. If a family member or the **granthi** are not available, then any practicing Sikh would be acceptable. Because it is seen as a religious and social duty to visit and give comfort and support some patients may have large numbers of visitors.

LAST OFFICES

Sikhs have no religious objection to the body of the deceased patient being touched by a non-Sikh. However, the family remains responsible for all the rites and procedures at death, and they must be asked if they wish to wash and lay out the body themselves. The nurses need only close the eyes and straighten out the limbs, and wrap the body in a plain sheet. The five K's are sacred objects, and they must not be removed from the body at death. Every Sikh is cremated with the five sacred symbols still in place. Cremation must take place as soon as possible. There is no objection to PMs or organ donation.

EVERY SIKH PATIENT IS AN INDIVIDUAL AND PRACTICE MAY VARY