



Caring for the Rastafarian Patient

Rastafarians are part of a growing movement which began in the West Indies in the 1930's. The movement is linked to the roots of resistance to slavery among the descendants of the black African slave families, and the identification with Africa is central to the principle of Rastafari.

The Rastafarian movement is a distinct entity which has rejected both Jamaican-European culture and the Christian Revivalist religion of Jamaica. The Bible is still regarded as Scripture, but Rastafarians would see themselves as different from ordinary Christians. They believe the true Messiah was Ras Tafari - Emperor Haile Sellasie 1 of Ethiopia.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

MEDICATION - Rastafarians may have an antipathy to Western medicines and be reluctant to use drug treatment for fear it will contaminate the body. Alternative therapies, such as herbalism, homeopathy or acupuncture may be preferred.

Many Rastafarians would choose to smoke marijuana, which they refer to as "ganja" or "the holy herb" and regard this as both a spiritual and a medical food. The fact that this is illegal in this country can manifest itself in an unwillingness on the part of the patient to answer questions in hospital.

DIET - All forms of pig meat are forbidden. Only natural food is eaten. Canned and chemical food is always avoided. Some fish (e.g. herrings and sardines) are not acceptable. Some Rastafarians choose to be vegetarians.

MODESTY - Rastafarian women traditionally dress modestly. Some patients may be unwilling to wear hospital garments which have been worn by others. Disposable gowns may be preferred.

HAIRSTYLE - Many Rastafarians are converts to the religion. Rastafarians are easily identified by their distinctive hairstyles - dreadlocks. Their hairstyles are a symbol of their faith and of black pride. Orthodox members may not cut their hair.

FAMILY - Many Rastafarians would regard traditional marriage as unnecessary and extended families can therefore be quite complex. Ideas about "next of kin" may differ. Visiting the sick is very important and sometimes quite large groups of extended family may wish to visit. Consideration may need to be given to this.

ORGAN DONATION/TRANSPLANT - These will be intensely disliked by most Rastafarians in the belief that they interfere with God's plan for mankind.

BLOOD TRANSFUSION - The fear of contamination of the body would influence the attitude to transfusion. Reassurance may be needed.

PRAYER

Rastafarians have a very deep love of God and believe that, where people are, God is present. Prayer, and privacy for prayer, can therefore be important.

AS DEATH APPROACHES

The family may wish to pray around the bedside of the dying patient. There are no special rites or rituals before or after death.

LAST OFFICES

Last Offices should be performed according to routine. Very few Rastafarians would agree to a post-mortem unless it were ordered by the Coroner. Families would be very unlikely to agree to the donation of a body for research. Burial is preferred but the wishes of the individual are respected. Some Rastafarians may be flown back to their country of origin.

EVERY RASTAFARIAN PATIENT IS AN INDIVIDUAL AND PRACTICE MAY VARY