
Table 1: Essential qualities of ethical approaches to communication and caregiving involving Chinese people

Assume diverse opinions: There is no monolithic Chinese culture; when dealing with Chinese Canadian patients, a broad range of beliefs should be anticipated. Furthermore, culture is not static, particularly in the case of immigration. Many Chinese Canadians hold beliefs and attitudes that are both blended and in transition. When uncertain of beliefs and perspectives, avoid assumptions and ask the patient or family directly.

Acknowledge potential differences in emotional expression: Chinese Canadians may not be comfortable with frank, direct styles of communication. Emotional containment does not mean indifference. Be cautious in assessing a person's emotional reaction.

Anticipate different views on informed consent: Many of the values common to traditional Chinese culture differ from the concept of autonomy that underpins Western bioethics. The Chinese patient may not strongly distinguish his or her wishes from those of the family. For many Chinese Canadians, withholding a diagnosis or controlling negative information may be seen as a way of fostering and maintaining hope in a patient. Identifying and negotiating these differences is therefore crucial to effective health care.

Use interpreters: Use an interpreter if there is any doubt about fluency in or understanding of English. It is always best to avoid using family members or close family friends as interpreters because they may not be comfortable with the direct nature of informed consent.

Involve the family: Chinese Canadians may believe that consent is a family — rather than an individual patient — decision. Making decisions based solely on a patient's wishes or perspectives on quality of life may be foreign to many Chinese Canadians. Moreover, "immediate family" may include multiple generations. Allow for large or multiple-generation family conferences. Applying the notion of autonomy cross-culturally may therefore warrant accepting each person's terms of reference for their definition of self. We respect patients' and families' autonomy by bringing their cultural values and beliefs into the decision-making process.

Anticipate differences in the understanding and meaning of illness: Because of radically different cultural and historical roots, some Chinese Canadians may hold perspectives on the nature and meaning of illness that differ substantially from a Western biomedical view. Again, it is best to ask about and negotiate these differences when building a treatment plan.

[\[Return to text\]](#)