

Cultural differences: practising medicine in an Islamic country

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Clin Med
2003;3:52-3

ABSTRACT – Islam and Muslims have been in the headlines recently for one reason or another. But the practice of medicine in an Islamic conservative country such as Saudi Arabia has not been adequately reported. Many questions about cultural differences in the practice of medicine have been directed at me by non-Muslim colleagues. Below, I have tried to answer some of them after practising at a university hospital in Saudi Arabia for the last 25 years.

KEY WORDS: Muslim, Islamic, practising medicine, cultural differences, Ramadan

Islamic countries stretch from Pakistan and beyond to Africa, and from Morocco to the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf, and Muslims are widespread all over the world. Saudi Arabia is home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and gave birth to Islam 1423 H years ago.

Do you shake hands with patients?

Male doctors should not shake hands with female patients. However, they are expected to shake hands with male patients. Female doctors can shake hands only with female patients.

Do you prescribe pork insulins?

No, and you should not suggest it unless it is a matter of life and death where it is permissible in Islam.

Can you perform post-mortems on Muslims?

No, unless it is a criminal investigation and the cause of death is unnatural and/or unknown.

Must female patients see female gynaecologists and obstetricians only?

No. Although many female patients prefer female gynaecologists, they can also be seen by male gynaecologists.

Are abortions and sterilisation allowed?

Yes, but under stricter control than in the western world. There must be considerable mental or physical risk to the mother before an abortion is performed, and the husband must agree. Tubal ligation is performed legally under certain conditions and the husband and wife must agree. Some gynaecologists are unwilling to carry out these operations, opposing them on religious or moral grounds.

Is IVF allowed?

IVF is accepted by Muslims and practised widely. Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to introduce IVF after its launch. However, the use of sperm from a donor other than the husband is absolutely forbidden in Islam.

Can male doctors examine female patients?

Yes, in the presence of a nurse, and the husband or father if available. If the patient is very shy, the doctor should pass over parts of the physical examination which are less relevant to the symptoms, or seek a female colleague to help. Female doctors can examine either sex.

Are medicines containing alcohol allowed?

Alcohol is strictly forbidden in Islam. Medicine containing alcohol is only allowed if there are no alternative treatments.

What about Ramadan?

Ramadan is the holy month of fasting and every healthy adult should abstain from food, drink and sex from sunrise to sunset. Most patients are able to fast with some adjustments to their medications. However, if fasting will interfere with the patient's treatment or complicate their illness Islam allows them not to fast. Most pregnant women can and do fast in Ramadan.¹

Can Muslim patients pray in bed or in a chair?

Yes, if their disease prevents them from standing.

Can Muslim patients be given blood transfusions and organ transplants?

Yes, patients can be given blood transfusions and organ transplants, such as kidney, liver, heart and cornea, when required.

Hajj considerations

Hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia is performed in the twelfth month of the Arabic or Hegra calendar every year. Around two million people from all corners of the globe attend the pilgrimage annually. Meningitis A and C vaccination are required. Some women may wish to delay menstruation until the end of the pilgrimage.² This is optional because menstruating women may continue with Hajj unhindered. During Hajj and the following period doctors must be aware that a patient's symptoms may be due to an imported exotic or common disease.

Do male and female medical students mix?

No. Both clinical teaching and tutorials are segregated. But male doctors do teach female students and vice versa.³

References

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