

Making Cultural Competency Work

Guest Editorial By Diane Adams, MD, MPH
Closing the Gap, Cultural Competence • January 2000

All it takes to see the need for cultural competency in health care is looking around, whether it's looking at the people you work with or the people driving by you in rush-hour traffic. The great variety of race and ethnicity in both urban and rural areas is here to stay. Think of how many people don't look like you, think like you, or talk like you. Now consider how these differences impact basic communication.

The implications for communications in health care can be a matter of life or death. For example, culture and language can affect whether a patient takes a proper dose of medication or even agrees to take medication at all. Not offering appropriate translation services could lead a hospital to misdiagnose the condition of a person with limited English-speaking skills. Distributing a brochure with culturally insensitive health messages can backfire and discourage a person from getting a check-up.

A first step for health care organizations interested in developing a cultural competency program is understanding what cultural competency means in health care. Some mistakenly equate it to cultural diversity or affirmative action. Some think cultural competency is only an issue for mainstream America. But at the crux of the concept is how well health workers of all races can reach, serve, and treat those people that don't look like them, think like them, and speak like them.

The need for culturally competent approaches is important in all health care settings, from managed care organizations to clinics. Here are more tips for integrating cultural competency into your organization.

- **Tap into good cultural competency resources.** Some organizations rule out cultural competency because they consider it too expensive. Too expensive to buy those training videos or too expensive to bring in a consultant. But many good resources that are free or low-cost can support your efforts. For example, the National Center for Cultural Competence offers a useful checklist called *Getting Started*. The free publication is on the Web: <http://www.dml.georgetown.edu/depts/pediatrics/gucdc/cultural.html>. Also look for experts who may volunteer time to help you. The Office of Minority Health Resource Center (1-800-444-6472) is a good starting place with its Resource Persons Network of experts who may be able to provide technical assistance as you develop a program.
- **Assess your staff's understanding of cultural competency.** Use a pre- and post-test as part of staff training. This will help you assess your people and your organization, a requirement for setting goals and identifying staff development needs. When I worked with staff at the Whitman Walker Clinic in Washington, DC, we used a cultural competence inventory that had 12 items. Respondents, which included doctors, nurses, mental health workers, and administrative

staff, were asked to rate their level of knowledge in various areas on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "no knowledge" and 5 meaning "much knowledge". Examples of items on the questionnaire: "Knowledge of questions to ask when conducting a cultural assessment of patients;" and "Knowledge of family and community influences on health care attitudes and behaviors of various cultural groups."

- **Make training reflective of real life.** Use guest speakers who can talk about how cultural competency has improved patient outcomes for their organization. Both best practice approaches and input on what kind of challenges to expect will help shape your program. For the Whitman Walker Clinic training, we also used case studies and role play scenarios to get health care workers truly involved.
- **Include minorities in leadership roles.** It's a simple enough concept, but many times decisions are made for minorities without their involvement. Empower minorities to take on leadership roles with your program's advisory committee or task force on cultural competency.
- **Put your organization's plans in writing.** Not only are you showing staff that cultural competency requires a real commitment, but a written plan will make everyone in your organization aware of your goals, your approach, and the rationale for your efforts. Look for models that work for organizations similar to yours. The National Black Nurses Association recently developed guidelines for its institute to train nurses on cultural competency.
- **Put ideas into action.** The National Mental Health Association states it well in its position paper on cultural competency (<http://www.nmha.org>): Many health systems simply pay lip service to the concept. Some organizations claim to be culturally competent, but don't have appropriate procedures in place to address diversity. Evaluate your current communication vehicles such as printed materials and your telephone system. Assess your target populations and make sure there's a clear communication path for each group.
Dr. Adams is senior medical advisor for the Center for Outcomes and Effectiveness Research, Agency for Health Care Research and Quality, (formerly the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, HHS). She is currently helping AHRQ create a Web site on cultural competence. Dr. Adams is also editor of the best-selling book, Health Issues for Women of Color: A Cultural Diversity Perspective, and presented a workshop on cultural competency at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association in November 1999. ❖

