

# Health Care Multicultural Style

**M**ulticulturalism is a Canadian way of life. Close to 80 distinct cultural groups can be found living in all regions of Canada. Six out of every 10 Canadians were born outside the country, and more than one-third speak languages other than English or French. Representing the majority of the population in most of Canada's major cities, ethnic minority groups are now the fastest-growing segments of the nation's population.

Multiculturalism is protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and was recently enshrined into law in the world's first Multiculturalism Act. And now Canada is emerging as a pioneer in multicultural health care.

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Defined as culturally appropriate, sensitive and responsive, multicultural health care has its roots in the city of Toronto. In 1950, two brothers from Hungary, Drs. Paul and John Rekai, came to Canada as part of the post-Second World War immigration tide. Many of these immigrants, unable to speak English or French, found it difficult to adapt to their new country. Determined to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers in the field of medical care, the Rekais founded a revolutionary new hospital in 1957.

Introducing the concept of multicultural health care to Canada, Central Hospital pioneered many of the methods now used world-wide. From the beginning, all facets of Central's operations were designed to respect and respond to different cultures.

Multicultural health services help to make the hospital stay less traumatic.

rooms. All written hospital material is produced in a range of languages, and a multilingual patient library supplies newspapers, magazines and books in more than 50 languages.

Central's food service is also uniquely international. Every patient's diet is designed to respond to nutritional needs, medical considerations and ethnic preference. Basic carbohydrate requirements, for example, may be met with

Cultural beliefs and norms can shape the delivery of health care. For example, different cultures have different "acceptable" responses to pain. Doctors must therefore be aware of such variances in order to accurately gauge the condition of their patients. Folk medicine also plays a critical role. Lab technicians note that Greek patients may be hesitant to give blood samples because their folklore emphasizes



Staff members were recruited from various ethnic backgrounds, spoke numerous languages and were specially trained in the varying cultural attitudes toward illness and health care.

Today, care is available at Central in some 30 languages as diverse as Italian, Chinese, Hungarian and Filipino. Patients are regularly visited by a staff member who speaks their language, and every effort is made to assign patients of the same nationality or those speaking a common language to shared

pasta, rice or lentils. And since spices are an indigenous part of a culture's food, meals are seasoned to the patient's taste whenever medically feasible.

Religion is an important consideration at Central. All efforts are made to accommodate various religious beliefs and customs, and celebrations of the various religious holidays take place throughout the year.

the danger of losing blood, while pharmacists sometimes reduce the size of pills in response to the Chinese folk belief that many small pills taken at once are more effective than a single large pill.

Other cultural beliefs affect everything from the temperature of food — the Chinese believe in a system of alternating hot and cold foods which maintains an equilibrium in the body — to interior decorating, as some cultures consider certain colours to be good luck.