

The demand for Central Hospital's multicultural services is overwhelming — not surprising, since Toronto is one of the world's most ethnically diverse cities. Today, ethnic groups represent 56 per cent of the metropolitan population, form more than 70 distinct communities and speak over 100 different languages. In response to this multicultural reality, Central Hospital recently established another first: it launched Canada's first multicultural care nursing home, the Re kai Centre.

Like Central, the Re kai Centre provides health care that is sensitive to diverse cultures. The centre's staff, fluent in more than 22 languages, ensure that all new residents are greeted in their native tongue and make extensive use of Central Hospital's multilingual library.

Although in operation for only a year, the Re kai Centre has many exciting success stories. For example, one of the centre's first patients, an elderly Korean woman transferred from another nursing home, had not spoken for more than five years. Yet soon after her arrival, she was chatting with staff in her native tongue and joining in the centre's celebration of Chinese New Year.

Multicultural health care also works at the other end of the age spectrum. Being admitted to hospital can be a frightening experience for anyone, but for young children, unable to understand what is happening, it is often terrifying.

In response, the Montreal Children's Hospital is adapting the basic premises of culturally sensitive health care to the special needs of sick children and their parents. On-the-spot interpreters help allay the fears of immigrant families unfamiliar with the Canadian health care system. And whenever possible, the hospital will relax its rules.

Worried parents can sometimes stay overnight in their child's room or bring in home-made treats such as chicken soup, perogies and even whale blubber.

More and more, multicultural health care is winning support across the country. One of the most innovative and wide-ranging applications of this concept is currently taking place in Canada's west-coast city of Vancouver.

Fifty-five per cent of Vancouver's residents are from one of the city's 78 cultural communities, and 50 per cent speak English as a second language. Responding to this diversity, the Vancouver Health Department has made multicultural health care a top priority.

Cultural beliefs and norms can shape the delivery of health care.

An ongoing multiculturalism education program provides interpretation services in 34 languages. One of the department's most successful ventures is a prenatal counselling program for pregnant immigrant women at risk because of cultural or linguistic isolation. It has contributed to a significant increase in the health level of infants born to this group. Another exciting project is the specially designed medical clinic that serves the unique needs of Vancouver's large refugee population from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Since accessible information on Canadian health care is a primary need for newcomers, key health department brochures and other information are translated into many languages. Interestingly, these materials are not written in the languages' "pure" forms, but rather in the unique dialects that have evolved. A series of similar health education videotapes, to be aired on local television networks, is also being produced.

Volunteers as well have taken up the cause of multicultural health care. The Manitoba Association for Childbirth and Family Education provides specifically trained volunteer companions for immigrant and refugee women in childbirth labour in Winnipeg. These volunteers, fluent in various languages, accompany the pregnant women to medical appointments, act as translators and explain procedures. Not only are they present as labour companions during birthing, but they also give individualized prenatal education consistent with the family's cultural traditions.

With rapidly growing evidence of its effectiveness, multicultural health care is now taught at many medical and nursing schools across Canada. The very first multicultural health care course, however, was taught at Newfoundland's Memorial University. So successful was the course, that today the University offers a number of undergraduate and graduate classes on the topic. These courses, like those taught elsewhere in Canada, teach students in all the health care

fields the broad principles behind effective multicultural care. Students obtain a basic knowledge of various cultures and learn how to elicit relevant information from confused and frightened patients. Instructors, however, stress that concern and respect for the individual remain a top priority in effective health care.

In a very short time, multicultural health care has created entirely new, often multidisciplinary, fields of study. Today, medical anthropologists, medical sociologists and even medical folklore specialists are conducting groundbreaking research at universities across Canada. Studies have already found that culturally sensitive care increases both the likelihood and speed of recoveries. And more and more, those on the front line of patient care believe that it makes sense. The reality is this: people who are sick feel better when their language, culture and religion are respected.

Inuit patients such as this woman receive medical care in their own language.



Photo: SSC Photo Centre