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Culture is important in healthcare

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The United States of America has been a kaleidoscope of cultures for hundreds of years. This has never been truer than it is today, as people from every corner of the globe continue to seek out a life in the U.S., whether permanently or temporarily. The multicultural makeup of the U.S.-especially in metropolitan areas-presents special challenges for medical professionals, whose job requires relating to patients on a very personal level. In urban areas it is not unusual for a doctor to have a diverse patient lineup-seeing a patient in the morning who recently emigrated from the Philippines, a multi-generational family of Indian descent later in the afternoon, and a tourist from China in the evening might be a typical day for some in the healthcare profession. Even doctors and nurses who work in rural areas will inevitably encounter people of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds in their careers, especially as the U.S. countryside continues to become more ethnically and racially diverse. Sensitivity, compassion, understanding, and acceptance of patients with different values, beliefs, and behaviors are essential qualities for those who work in the medical arena. The increasing diversity of the nation brings opportunities and challenges for health care providers, health care systems, and policy makers to create and deliver culturally competent services. Cultural competence is defined as the ability of providers and organizations to effectively deliver health care services that meet the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of patients. A culturally competent health care system can help improve health outcomes and quality of care, and can contribute to the elimination of racial and ethnic health disparities. Examples of strategies to move the health care system towards these goals include providing relevant training on cultural competence and cross-cultural issues to health professionals and creating policies that reduce administrative and linguistic barriers to patient care.

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