

FAQ: Displaying Christmas decorations

Question

Is it OK to set up a Christmas tree and other decorations in our patient care unit in the hospital? Should we wish people Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays? We don't want to offend anyone but we also want to celebrate Christmas on our unit.

Response

Christmas is a secular holiday as well as a spiritual celebration. It has many symbols, including Christmas trees which have become as much a cultural symbol as they are a religious symbol. Many non-Christians celebrate this time of year – perhaps as a time of coming together with family or as a time for much needed relaxation. Being respectful of religious holidays observed by our patient population is important and this includes Christmas.

It's more appropriate to wish Merry Christmas to Christians and Happy Holidays or Seasons Greetings to non-Christians. If you don't know a person's religious affiliation it might be better to say Happy Holidays or Seasons Greetings.

Discussion

The Calgary Health Region defines diversity as all the ways we are unique and different from one another. One of the most important differences between individuals is religion. Respecting religious diversity means, above all, allowing people to follow the practices of their religion as long as does not interfere with the ability of others to follow their religion or compromise safety.

In practice this means that we need to make accommodations whenever possible and reasonable which allow coworkers and patients/clients to participate in their cultural and religious practices. It is also important to refrain from putting up barriers that would, for example, prevent people from eating the food they need to eat or from wearing the clothes they need to wear. But again, safety is always the priority and it will take precedent over cultural or religious matters. Some examples are:

- a helmet is required on a motorcycle regardless of cultural or religious head coverings and
- knives, of whatever kind or purpose, cannot be carried on to airplanes. (See also the FAQ that deals with the case of a woman who wanted to wear her kirpan during surgery.)

The display of cultural or religious symbols in the work place is somewhat more complex because displaying them is not required by religion or law. Erecting a decorated spruce tree in a reception area at Christmas or placing a menorah or candelabra in the window during Hanukkah is a voluntary act of celebration. It is an opportunity for the members of different cultures and religions to share their traditions with others and for others to demonstrate their appreciation and respect for that tradition. It is a chance to affirm our respect for one another.

Sometimes cultural or religious symbols can provoke strong feelings from people who have experienced trauma for religious reasons. For example, a person who was traumatised by a religious leader may feel uneasy with the display of any religious symbolism. Display of religious and cultural symbols are less about rights than they are about tolerance and compassion. We need to approach such cases on an individual basis and attempt to address the underlying feelings and attitudes. The principle is that the Calgary Health Region endeavours to show respect for all the ways we are different from each other. The Region's values include caring and respectful relationships.

A brief environmental scan

A survey of our municipal, provincial and federal governments found that none have a specific policy regarding Christmas trees and decorations. Christmas trees and decorations can be found in the offices and buildings of all three levels of government. A survey of other Regional Health Authorities in Alberta similarly found that none have a specific policy regarding Christmas decoration. These matters are usually left to individual departments or units. Most departments and units choose to celebrate many of the religious and cultural festivals (see below) of their employees or clients.

The City of Edmonton displays Christmas trees in public spaces. There is also a display area at City Hall devoted to "celebrating our faith heritage" where displays of all religions are regularly displayed.

Departments or units that want to put up displays in recognition of Christmas or any other religious or cultural event must be careful to observe fire and safety regulations. For example, electrical circuits can be overloaded by decorative lights, extension cords can injure people, plug splitters can cause sparks and/or shocks, candles can cause fires, displays can block fire exits, trees can fall over and ornaments can break. Be sure to consult with your department's fire warden.

A brief background on Christmas

Christmas decorations and trees are an especially interesting issue because they are as much a cultural symbol as they are a religious symbol. Many people who are not Christians celebrate with Christmas trees and gift-giving. The very celebration of Christmas pre-dates Christianity. According to Dr. Ann Moore, from the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Calgary, December 25 was actually the last day of a four-day Roman festival celebrating the Winter Solstice (December 21). It was strategically adopted by the early Christians. No one really knows when Christ was born but circumstantial evidence (sheep being out in the fields, the positions of constellations, etc.) leads most scholars to believe that Christ was actually born in May or June.



The tradition of decorating a spruce tree with gifts, lights or shiny bobbles is also borrowed from Northern Europe. Mistletoe, reindeer, spruce trees and even Santa

Claus are all cultural traditions that pre-date Christianity. None of these symbols would be found in the warmer climate in which Christ lived.

Orthodox churches use the Julian calendar and celebrate Christmas on January 7.

Other Religious/Cultural Events:

Hanukkah (literally means “dedication”), also known as the Festival of Lights, is an 8 day festival which is a celebration of recalling the war of victory fought by the Maccabees in the cause of religious freedom and the rededication of the Temple after recapturing it from the Syrian Greeks. This day reminds Jews of their victory over the Syrian king who have forbade them to practice their religion. It also celebrates the miracle that took place when one cruse of oil was able to keep the Menorah alight for eight days. Each evening candles are lit on the “menorah” or candelabra, adding one candle on each night. Hanukkah is a time for playing games and singing, for visiting and for giving gifts. One popular Hanukkah game is played with a “driedel”, or a spinning top. It is traditional to eat food fried in oil during Hannukah. Some common foods are potato latkes and "sufganiot" (jelly doughnuts).It begins on December 21 in 2008 and on December 11 in 2009.



Yom Kippur (literally Day of Atonement) is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, a day of fasting and prayers of repentance. It is celebrated according to a lunar calendar so the date changes every year. It begins on October 8 in 2008 and on September 27 in 2009.

Easter is the holiest holiday of the Christian calendar commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is observed on the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs after the Spring Equinox. As such, it can occur anytime between March 22 and April 25

Diwali is perhaps the most popular of Hindu festivals celebrating one of the stories of the destruction of evil by Vishnu. It will be observed on October 28 in 2008 and on October 17 in 2009.



Holi is a joyous spring Hindu festival that is dedicated to Krishna in some parts of India; in other parts of India, it is dedicated to Kama, the God of Pleasure. People throw coloured water or coloured powder in celebration. It will be celebrated on March 22 in 2008 and on March 11 in 2009.

Naw Ruz (literally New Year) is a Middle Eastern cultural celebration that is shared by Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is. It is celebrated on March 21, the first day of spring.

'Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice): One of the two main Islamic festivals this festival falls on the 10th day of the lunar month of Zul-Hijja and is the concluding act of pilgrimage to Mecca. ('Id al-Adha is observed whether or not one is on pilgrimage.) It will be celebrated on December 20 in 2008 and November 27 in 2009.

'Id al-Fitr (Festival of the Breaking of the Fast) is the other main Islamic festival celebrating the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting. It comes on the first day of the next lunar month, Shawal. It will be celebrated on October 3 in 2008 and on September 21 in 2009.

Guru Nanak's Birthday Observes the birth of the founder of the Sikh religion in 1469 C.E. The first of the Ten Gurus, Guru Nanak was born in 1469 C.E. It will be celebrated on November 13 in 2008 and on November 02 in 2009.

Chinese New Year is the biggest celebration of the year in China, Tibet, Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan and for Canadians from these countries. This event involves cleaning and decorating homes, new clothes, special meals and many days of celebration. It will be celebrated on February 07 in 2008 and on January 26 in 2009.



Kwanzaa is an African-American cultural holiday conceived and developed by Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga, that was first celebrated on December 26, 1966. Kwanzaa is traditionally celebrated from December 26 through January 1, with each day focused on Nguzo Saba, or the seven principles. Africans and African-Americans of all religious faiths and backgrounds practice Kwanzaa.

