

FAQ: Taking a cultural object into surgery

Question: A Calgary Health Region surgeon, concerned about staff and patient safety, requested that a patient take off her *kirpan* prior to a surgical procedure. The patient refused, stating that “others” had operated on her in the past while she had it on. Should the surgeon insist on removing the *kirpan* in the interests of safety or allow the patient to wear it in the interests of respect for diversity. Furthermore, what is a *kirpan*?

Response

Patient safety is a priority of the Calgary Health Region and is tied to the organization’s vision, mission and values. Risks to safety of the patient or staff must take precedence over other considerations. However, upon investigation of this particular issue there is a solution that respects both safety and cultural diversity.

When we consulted leaders in the Sikh community they stated that it is acceptable for the client to remove the kirpan if it interferes with a medical procedure. The Sikh patient will say a prayer before removing the kirpan and may have special instructions on where to store the kirpan until he/she returns from surgery. It would be best, of course, if the patient was provided this information from one of their community leaders rather than from a health care professional who was not a member of that community. Our role is to show respect for an issue that is clearly important to the patient.

The *kirpan* is a ceremonial knife or traditional small sword worn by some Sikhs. The *kirpan* is one of five symbols of Sikhism. *Kirpan* (from *kirpa*: mercy and *aan*: honour) symbolizes power and freedom of spirit, and is a reminder to Sikhs to fight injustice and oppression, but is not to be used as an instrument of violence.¹

Communication is one of the pillars of the Region’s quality and safety strategy and is the key to resolving this issue, as with other issues that involve patient safety and diversity. If you face a similar issue we recommend that you first engage the patient in a discussion of how you can work together to find a solution. If that does not work, call the Diversity Educator, Healthy Diverse Populations (944-0247) for expert diversity advice. You can work with the Diversity Educator to approach leaders of the relevant community or group for advice.

For more information about how to deal effectively with issues related to diversity, please contact us at diversity.servces@calgaryhealthregion.ca.

More information

The kirpan is usually about 8 inches long, is blunt and is worn sheathed and attached to a cloth belt, called the *gatra*.



(Figure .the Sikh kirpan).

A *kirpan* is no more dangerous than a dinner knife and its use in an act of violence is practically unknown. Nevertheless persons who are not aware of this cultural object may have legitimate security and safety concerns when they encounter a Sikh patient with a *kirpan*. For example, there may be rare instances of a patient wearing a potentially unsafe *kirpan*, such as one with sharp edges or a pointed tip. In even rarer instances, a patient may insist on wearing a much longer *kirpan*, such as the 3-foot long *kirpan*s that are worn on ceremonial occasions. In such cases, staff may have reasonable concerns about safety but feel unable to discuss the issues for fear that cultural sensitivities are compromised. Even if the Sikh patient him/herself is not deemed at risk, a *kirpan* may be considered a health hazard if another patient may somehow gain access to it (Swaran, 2004). Misconceptions and lack of knowledge of the *kirpan* and other cultural or spiritual objects from ethnocultural communities may lead to conflicts between client and providers.

This issue was discussed with leaders and members of the Sikh community in Calgary to gain understanding of this issue and to help staff avoid conflicts or misunderstandings in the future. The following important points came from these community contacts:

A male Sikh scholar, Community member:

“Baptised Sikhs are supposed to wear kirpan. As per belief they are not supposed to remove it from their body. Even when they are bathing they are supposed to tie it to another part of the body. However, when a person has to travel by air he/she has to remove the kirpan as the air safety regulations take precedence over the religious beliefs. Similarly a mentally disturbed patient cannot be trusted to carry a kirpan as it is a safety issue for the staff and the other patients. A member of parliament in India was not allowed to enter the parliament because he was carrying a kirpan which was longer than the specified length. Hence the law took precedence over religious belief. Faith plays an important role in healing. If a person has faith in a symbol, it may help in faster healing, therefore if the kirpan is not interfering with a procedure or it is not a safety or technical issue, the patient may be allowed to keep the symbol.”

A female Sikh, Community member

“Kirpan is one of the five signs a baptized Sikh will carry. The behaviour in such situations (e.g that between surgeon and client) can be different for different people. Some people may like to tie the kirpan to their head or any other body part during the surgery. These days they do not let people carry kirpan onto airplanes either. So they have to part with it and re-wear it with a prayer after reaching the destination.”

Two senior members of Sikh council (visit to the temple)

“Kirpan is one of 5 symbols (pointing to a bangle on his left arm) baptized Sikhs have to carry along. Not every Sikh carries the kirpan. It is never plastic and is supposed to be worn covered so others don't see it nor have access to it. The events of the past years made it banned from airplanes. However, these days, smaller ones may be allowed on flight and on a bus. In most cases individuals make decisions themselves. In situations such as this one certified health care interpreters can be used to explain the safety concerns to the client. In cases where the kirpan (even the turban) must absolutely be removed, the patient can say a prayer after and put it on.

Besides health care settings, concerns over safety issues related to the *kirpan* have been documented elsewhere e.g. students wearing a *kirpan* to school (Quebec case-

supreme court ruling), passengers wearing a kirpan in public transport (Ottawa-VIA RAIL), or during flights (www.sikhs.ca/kirpan). In 2006, a Danish court ruled that it was illegal for a Sikh man to carry a kirpan. "Although Indian national wore the blunt knife as a 'religious' symbol,' it was still a violation of a ban on bearing weapons, including knives, except for carrying out a trade, hunting, fishing or other recreational activities"².

Swaran (1) recommended some strategies that might be useful in relation to caring for patients wearing the *kirpan*. These strategies may not entirely apply in our context but may serve as an example of how the situation has been dealt with elsewhere. The strategies include:

1. It is important to remember that not all Sikhs wear the *kirpan* and issues related to the kirpan will be relatively rare.
2. If a patient is wearing the *kirpan*, staff should not automatically assume that it is dangerous. It may be necessary to examine the *kirpan* to ensure safety.
3. If there are concerns about safety, these should be discussed openly but sensitively with the patient, explaining that the concerns are about safety and in no way are challenging or judging the religious traditions of Sikhs.
4. Patients should be allowed to express their views including venting distress, since for devout Sikhs, the five *Ks* are the paramount and highly emotive articles of faith. Brusque, confrontational or insensitive handling of the discussion is only likely to appear insulting, and may polarise and entrench opinions.
5. Solutions should be allowed to emerge from within these discussions, rather than imposed. A simple solution might be to replace a potentially 'risky' *kirpan* with a smaller, safer one.
6. Mental health services may like to have a few sheathed *kirpans*, which meet health and safety standards, along with *gattras* (the cloth 'holster') on the wards. The patient should be allowed to choose one from these instead, and the family should be asked to keep the patient's *kirpan* at home during the in-patient stay.

Broader Implications

Cultural objects are unique for different ethnic populations. For example, some people from China carry *Jade* – a gemstone of unique symbolic energy, and unique in the myths that surround it. With its beauty and wide-ranging expressiveness, jade has held a special attraction for mankind for thousands of years. In gemstone therapy it is said that jade 'stimulates creativity and mental agility on the one hand, while also having a balancing and harmonising effect', bringing joy, vivacity and happiness all at the same time³.

Aboriginal Peoples in Canada may carry sacred objects of different kinds, such as *medicine bags or pouches*⁴. Under the guidance of an elder, a medicine bag is generally prescribed for a person seeking mercy, protection or guidance of the spirits. The pouch usually contains plant materials, such as roots or herbs, dried animal parts, and sometimes tiny pebbles. Ideally, a medicine pouch should remain with an individual at all times for the medicine to be most effective.

Recommendations

Having information about different cultural beliefs and use of cultural objects would be a great asset to solving problems arising from cultural misunderstandings. However, in a diverse society like ours, asking health care providers to understand every detail of

every culture would be overwhelming. When confronted with an issue related to cultural objects we recommend a three-stage approach:

- 1) Engage patients in a discussion of their beliefs and the concerns of the health care provider. This way, patients are more likely to feel that their belief systems are understood and respected. Make sure that there are no language problems contributing to a misunderstanding.
- 2) If the patient cannot discuss their beliefs and practices, then the health care provider can contact the Diversity Educator at Healthy Diverse Populations who may have some experience with the issue or know someone who does.
- 3) Work with the Diversity Educator to contact senior members of the relevant community or group for advice.

Useful Resources

Healthy Diverse Populations is available to answer questions, provide guidance and information to staff when dealing with issues that arise when working with diverse clients/patients, families and communities. Healthy Diverse Populations can be reached at (403) 943-0205 or diversity.services@calgaryhealtyregion.ca.

Essential qualities of ethical approaches to communication and care giving involving Hindu and Sikh patients:

<http://www.cmaj.ca/content/vol163/issue9/images/large/21tt1.jpeg>

Other websites:

<http://www.sikhnet.com>

<http://www.allaboutsikhs.com>

<http://www.sikhs.org>

<http://pb.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/28/3/93>

¹ Caring for Sikh patients wearing a kirpan: cultural sensitivity and safety issues. Available August 21, 2007 at <http://pb.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/28/3/93>

² http://lifestyle.monstersandcritics.com/religion/news/article_1214073.php/Danish_court_confirms_ban_on_Sikh_carrying_ceremonial_knife

³ <http://www.gemstone.org/gem-by-gem/english/jade.html>

⁴ Aboriginal Spirituality. Directive Ref no. 37/96. Ministry of the Solicitor General and Correctional services. Available July 30, 2007 at <http://aboriginallegal.ca/docs/ministry.htm>