Culture
Beliefs Values
Shared Amongst a People
Identity

Culture. It is a simple word with a simple definition that encompasses so much of what is important. When we are amongst those of our own culture everything makes sense and understanding the world comes naturally. It is easy to put to ease fears when sharing an intense or frightening experience with those of our culture. When tossed into a different culture for the first time it can be both terrifying and exhilarating as everything one has known to be true is suddenly up in the air. When we find out that other groups of people live with a totally different view of the world, it can be intense.

Competent: a person that is adequately qualified for his or her position; a person that is capable of adapting and has the capacity to respond appropriately when faced with a diverse set of circumstances. It takes hard work and devotion to become competent in a given field. Becoming culturally aware is no easier than any other subject, but for the medical professional it is imperative for successful treatment of the diverse population of patients seeking care. Developing cultural competence in my life has consisted of traveling the world, improving cultural awareness throughout the community I serve and recognizing and understanding unique subcultures.

For me, learning is not complete unless approached from a vast and encompassing viewpoint, familiar with not just one theory or understanding of the world, but multiple ones. Great minds are not of one locale, nor complete knowledge from a single source. Rather, it involves immersion and integration of multiple ideas, experiences and influences. I want to partake in the rich culture and literature from all parts of the world and incorporate them soundly into my own practice. My mother is from La Plata,
Argentina, and I have visited my family there many times. I cherish my time there and get homesick for Argentina more than anywhere else. I believe having family in a completely different part of the world has allowed me to grow up much more aware of cultural differences. Not only have I always been aware, I have never felt threatened or intimidated by someone else’s life or beliefs. Instead I have always found them intriguing and loved to find out more about other unique parts of the world. I have a deep love of cultures and to experience them adds richness to my life. In the summer of 2005 I participated in a preceptorship in Mulukuku, Nicaragua, which proved to be an invaluable experience. During my time there, I examined and interviewed close to a hundred patients and became completely comfortable in performing well-woman exams. I took joy in chatting with the children playing in the schoolyard by our clinic and was able to bring home some of their beautiful artwork. My future international plans include working in rural clinics in Costa Rica next summer, establishing a new UTMB elective in La Plata, Argentina and doing a senior elective in a South African AIDS clinic.

Focusing on the Spanish language, specifically medical Spanish, has become a top priority for me in preparation for communicating with Hispanic patients. Since coming to UTMB I have met many people who share these interests. We knew the best way to learn would be to work together and in turn help other students who were interested in learning Spanish. I became president of *Qué Quiere Decir* (QQD) Spanish Club in 2005, and within a few months our group applied for and was awarded a grant that funded the purchase of medical Spanish textbooks and trips for students to volunteer with *Frontera de Salud*. Participating with *Frontera* has given me first-hand knowledge concerning underserved populations and barriers to healthcare here in the U.S. The
experience truly personalizes patient care because on these trips to Brownsville we work not only in a clinic but also within a community center and in the patients’ homes. It serves as a powerful reminder of how the devotion of students can establish a long-lasting impact on a community’s health and overall progress. The grant QFD received also allowed us to contribute to Amigos de Salud, a branch of Frontera. This program provides patients from the Valley who need a medical procedure or intervention at UTMB both transportation and accommodation in Galveston. In addition, a bilingual student meets the patient upon arrival and escorts them throughout their visit so they make their appointments without confusion. It has been an important and rewarding experience for those students that have participated. An end of the year survey taken by QFD participants illustrated a dramatic increase not only in medical Spanish proficiency but also a greater appreciation of the importance of knowing medical Spanish as a healthcare provider. QFD is now one of the largest student organizations at UTMB, and it will be incredibly exciting to see how UTMB is affected as QFD students begin moving into the hospitals for their clinical years.

Aside from pursuing knowledge about the Hispanic community both within Texas and abroad, I have always had a desire to learn about different subcultures that are not necessarily defined by their homeland or ethnicity but some other common factor. Each generation of adolescents, for example, brings together a new style of music, attitudes and behaviors that then establish a separate “culture” that is directly linked to their age. Unfortunately, disease itself can create new subcultures such as HIV/AIDS, which when diagnosed in a patient can mean a lifetime of living with social stigma that creates a totally new outlook on life. For me, it is incredibly important to understand the views and
changes that affect patients suffering from this disease so that I may better treat them as a physician. During college I volunteered at an HIV/AIDS Activities Center where people could come and spend the day playing games and doing crafts with others suffering from their disease. It was a private place where they could relax without fear of being judged solely by their diagnosis. It was an eye-opening experience for me as the patients there ranged from age 20 to 70, of all races, with families and without, demonstrating just how diverse the population affected with HIV/AIDS really is. It was a great time volunteering at the center and for our last volunteer session we organized a karaoke party. Many people had expressed interest in singing, but, of course, shyness got the better of many. We broke the ice with some Michael Jackson classics and then took requests. One older patient “Maria” looked through our CDs and was filled with delight when she found a Selena CD, and we obliged her request singing in Spanish *Bidi Bidi Bom Bom* (much to the amusement of everyone at the center that day). Needless to say, the entire experience taught me about appreciating the difficulty in coping with HIV/AIDS due to stigma and how important it is for physicians to realize how this affects their patients. It is important to be competent not only in different ethnic and racial cultures, but in the many different subcultures that may exist in a society as well.

The ideal doctor-patient relationship consists of mutual respect, open communication without fear or judgment and from the physician’s stance, a total understanding of what the patient experiences. People of all walks of life understand the importance of such a relationship and those who experience it to its fullest capacity appreciate how it has shaped their health and thus, the quality of their life. Health care professionals work for years to broaden their understanding of disease and improve their
clinical skills so as to become a good physician. No matter how much knowledge is acquired, however, the inability to communicate effectively with a patient renders that information useless. The noble physician pursues an avenue of lifelong learning with experiences from as many places as possible, which enables them to become culturally aware, competent, and thus, a much better health care provider. I will become such a physician and will continue to work hard to ensure cultural competence to the highest standard in my practice.