

VOICES OF THE SAMOAN COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

Demographic changes in the Seattle area are having a profound impact on the local health care delivery system. Health care providers need to hear from ethnic communities about their experience in trying to access health care. Offering culturally appropriate care requires being open to the perceptions, realities and expectations of a community that may be different from one's own.

The Cross-Cultural Health Care Program (CCHCP) at Pacific Medical Center works with health care providers, interpreters and community-based organizations to address these needs. Established in 1992, the CCHCP is funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This "Voices of the Communities" profile is one of a series developed by the CCHCP. The profiles and an earlier survey of 22 underserved ethnic communities are part of the CCHCP's effort to provide a forum for underserved communities to interact with the health care community. These profiles were developed by and in consultation with members of the profiled community.

SAMOAN DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Location and nations

Samoa refers to a group of islands in the South Pacific. Western Samoa is an independent country; American Samoa is a U.S. Territory. Although there is no difference in culture between the two, there is a difference in immigration status in the United States. People from Western Samoa have to apply to become permanent U.S. residents; American Samoan people do not.

Social system

Politically, Samoa is a hierarchy. The smallest unit is the family. To Samoans, the family includes an extended family of common ancestors, marriage ties and adoptions. Several extended families cluster together in a geographical area to form a village. A village council coordinates activities involving all families of the village.

Religion

Religion plays an important role in Samoan life; almost everyone belongs to a church. The Christian church has a great impact on the lives of Samoan people. Children are seen as gifts from God and Samoans value big families. Samoans believe that the outcome of medical treatment (by both Western and traditional medicine) is a manifestation of the healing power of the Almighty God through the intervention of human prayers.

Languages

Older Samoans speak primarily in Samoan and have only limited English. The opposite is true of younger Samoans.

Social values

Traditionally, elders were respected for their knowledge, wisdom and skills to lead their people. Today, Samoan people are placing more emphasis on educational programs, such as health education on childbirth and family planning, to spread knowledge on important issues.

THE SAMOAN COMMUNITY IN THE SEATTLE AREA

Population size and residence

Although the 1990 census shows only 4,130 Samoans in the entire state of Washington, agencies serving Samoans in the Seattle area believe that a more accurate number is more than 10,000. The under-count is likely a result of many Samoan families not responding to the census questionnaire, especially those from Western Samoa who may have been concerned about their immigration status. According to the census, approximately 27 percent of Samoans in the state live in the Seattle area.

Employment and family life

There are two primary reasons Samoans give for immigrating to Seattle: to give their children a better education and because there are no job opportunities in their home country. The majority of Samoan immigrants are young people and less-skilled workers and their children.

In Seattle, Samoans live in family groups. However, instead of families grouping into a village, Samoan families here join churches and look to the church for community support. They are involved in church activities and find groups of church people to work and socialize with. They also center their family activities around the church.

Community organizations

Because of this strong church involvement, the Samoan community in Seattle is fragmented. There are a few community agencies such as Samoan Chiefs Council, Sisters of Samoa, Seattle Samoan Center, and Polynesian Seniors Center. But there is widespread involvement in community activities by family groups.

CONCEPTS OF HEALTH CARE AND MEDICINE

Medical care

Modern medicine in Samoa is operated by the government and is available for everyone with fees on a sliding scale. Public health nurses deliver health care to people in every village free of charge. Medical teams will visit throughout the island for specific purposes, such as immunizations or checkups for seniors. People with acute medical problems or emergencies, and those needing routine health visits see the doctor at the medical center clinic. Midwives are commonly used in Samoa for childbirth, although now the midwife has to be licensed by the government and work at a hospital.

Since Samoa is small compared to the United States, patients get to know the medical personnel. Patients treat medical personnel with respect and are treated likewise. Patients are used to having a friendly and trusting relationship with health care providers.

Traditional healing

Before Christianity came to Samoa, Samoans believed in several gods. The gods were thought to bring affliction or tragedy upon people who would not live according to their wishes. Samoans also believed in ghosts who could bring turmoil and tragedy upon an individual, family or people. Even now, many Samoans believe that a curse or punishment in the form of a disease can come upon a family for an ungodly way of living.

Home remedies

Many Samoan people continue to use traditional medicine interchangeably with modern medical practice or as a supplement if modern medicine is not helping. Home remedies include herbal medicines, oil massaged on the sore parts of the body, and heating the body to sweat as a way of combating high fever and chills. Many Samoans would like to continue using herbal medicines but are unable to find the ingredients in the United States.

Sometimes they combine over-the-counter remedies with traditional techniques. For example, an elder woman will use tea leaves with water to massage the head of a person with a headache at the same time the person is taking aspirin. Samoan treatment is thought to have no side effects because it relies on the use of herbs, roots and leaves. Usually, the Samoan medication needs to be applied twice in order to see any change. If it is not effective, the family will take the sick person to the doctor or hospital. In the case of children, the Samoan treatment will be used when the child gets out of the hospital.

Religion

Whatever treatments are used, an elder takes the family's efforts to God in prayers, as Samoans believe that nothing will be done without God's intervention. Samoan people have faith in prayers and believe that the patient and family members must have faith in the medical practices in order to have an effective outcome.

Mental health

Before 1970, Samoan people believed mental illness was a punishment or a penalty from God. It was not acceptable even to talk about mental illness. More recently, educational programs conducted throughout the islands are teaching people about mental health problems and are helping to change attitudes.

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO HEALTH CARE

Medical care and providers

All people have access to medical treatment in Samoa, which includes public health nurse visits to villages at no cost. Patients have no papers to fill out. Relatives are allowed to be with the patient at all times. Doctors give direct answers to questions from patients. Samoan men prefer to see a male doctor; Samoan women prefer a female doctor. The contrast with medical services in the United States makes the U.S. medical system unsatisfactory and hard to understand. Samoans believe health care should be more affordable or insurance more available.

Another limitation Samoan people find in the Western approach is the absence of prayer. Samoan people always believe in prayers as a final solution to a health problem.

Language

Older Samoans speak limited English. They especially have difficulty in filling out the papers required by the health care system. Although younger Samoans speak English, they often have difficulties in fully comprehending health care terminology. This can be a problem in describing medical history to provide complete information to a health care provider. Language can also be a barrier in understanding the doctor's advice and directions. Even if language is not a problem, a Samoan may still have to translate the cultural perspective when talking with Western health care personnel.

Transportation

Transportation is a serious problem for accessing health care in the Seattle area. About 90 percent of Samoan families here are considered low income and can afford only one car. They must rely on relatives to take them to health care facilities. They often are afraid to use the bus system because of their limited English language skills, or because the routes and schedules are inconvenient or they have difficulty in locating the health care facility.

Suggestions

- * Cultural sensitivity training would help health care providers be more sensitive to the needs of diverse populations. Providers should take time to listen to the patients and understand that they may have special needs.
- * Facilities should assign providers of the appropriate gender.
- * Patients who do not drive and have limited English should be offered an alternative means of transportation for trips to a health care provider, such as taxi cab vouchers.
- * To help people understand the health care system, educational programs should be given on such topics as nutrition, diabetes, drug and alcohol abuse, and preventive medicine. Programs should be available in the different languages of Seattle's diverse population.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Profile prepared by: Mr. Logologo Saau, 3714 S. Holly St., Seattle, WA 98118, (206) 723-3177 (home), (206) 725-8200 (work).

This profile is based on interviews with a group of about 17 mothers and fathers, plus interviews and observation of three elders who practiced traditional medicine. The author also presented the draft to the Samoan community for consensus.

References include:

EOC Cultural Diversity Information, 1995.
Oliver, Douglas L. *The Pacific Islands*.
U.S. Census, 1990.

This is a condensed version of the profile. For the complete profile and survey report, please contact the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program, (206) 621-4429. Further readings and resource materials are available at the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program's Resource Center, (206) 326-4085.

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Cross Cultural Health Care Program
Pacific Medical Center
1200 12th Avenue South
Seattle, WA 98144
(206) 326-4161