

Culture and Health Disparities: Hmong Health Beliefs and Practices in the United States

Introduction



Hmong Story Cloth

The Hmong are a nomadic group of pre-literate farmers without a country, living in mountainous areas of Southeast Asia, such as China, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. After assisting the United States (U.S.) during the Vietnam War, the Hmong immigrated to America in the 1970s as refugees. The Hmong settled throughout various parts of the U.S. as part of the scattering policy.

Background

- Understudied ethnic minority living in the U.S. for over 40 years
- Poorest ethnic minority
- 36% have less than H.S. education
- 27% Live in poverty
- 54% Children in poverty
- 41% Public Assistance
- 32% Overcrowded living
- 11% Unemployed



Hmong American population grew significantly faster than the U.S. average between 2000 to 2013 at 51% vs. 12%

Review of the Literature

Shamanistic Healing Ceremonies



Traditional Herbal Medicinal Use



Cultural discordance of care in the Western Healthcare System

Hand Tying Ceremony



Hmong in the United States

Cultural Health Perceptions

- Belief of spirits dominate all aspects life and health
- Illnesses are caused by evil spirits or loss of one's soul
- Hand tying ceremony prevent the soul from wandering
- Shamans are believed to be spiritual healers
- Shamanistic rituals are performed to restore health and balance
- Traditional herbal remedies are the preferred choice for illness management
- Western medicine is a last resort

Mistrust of U.S. System

- Western healthcare system is not set up to address health perceptions of the Hmong
- Many Hmong Americans fear being experimented on by healthcare providers
- Skeptical of Western medicine and interventions

Health Literacy

- Inability to understand concepts of human body
- Mental illnesses are hard to comprehend
- Medical care is not sought in absence of symptoms
- Inability to understand the germ theory
- Preventative care does not exist in the Hmong American worldview

Linguistic Discordance

- No written language, Hmong is an oral culture
- 92% Hmong Americans speak predominately Hmong
- Limited Hmong vocabulary to describe diseases
- Medical information is difficult to translate to Hmong
- Lack of professional Hmong medical interpreters

Disease Prevalence

- Young life expectancy
- Common health complications: Diabetes, Hypertension, Kidney Disease, Cancer, Hepatitis
- 1.3-1.9 times higher mortality vs. non-Hispanic Whites
- 8.9 times higher mortality for stomach cancer vs. Asian Americans

Summary

The Hmong migration to the U.S. occurred over 45 years ago. However, acclimation to the U.S. continues to be a struggle as they tightly hold onto their traditional beliefs and practices. The strongest Hmong cultural values are embedded in their health beliefs and practices. The Hmong's unique traditional beliefs in healing practices and alternative medicine has resulted in poor health outcomes, high mortality rates and poor provider patient relationships. Improving health outcomes for Hmong Americans face challenges due to poor health literacy, linguistic discordance and mistrust of the Western healthcare system.

Conclusion/Further Study

The literature reveals there are multiple challenges and barriers to healthcare for Hmong Americans. However, the lack of awareness and understanding by healthcare providers compound these issues. Health disparities and cultural beliefs play an important role in the health outcomes of the Hmong. Cultural competence and sensitivity training is warranted when caring for diverse patient populations such as the Hmong. Further research on Hmong health and disease prevalence in the United States is necessary.

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