

# **Faith and Cultural Aspects of Grief, Bereavement and Dying**

## **An Islamic perspective**

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The care of dying patients and their relatives is one of the most difficult aspects of a doctor's job. Enabling an individual to die with dignity can also be deeply rewarding. Australia today is a multi-faith and multi-cultural society, the care of patients with different backgrounds requires knowledge and skills. There are approximately half a million Muslims in Australia. Islamic Law (Shariah) is based on the Qur'an and Hadith (the practices and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH) The Shariah defines certain expected behaviours at the time of death and these are generally adhered to by Muslims. In this paper I offer some guidance on caring for patients in their final illness.

### ***Concept of death in Islam***

For the Muslim, the whole of this life constitutes a trial and a test for the human by means of which his final destiny is determined. For him, death is the return of the soul to its Creator, God. In another words, death marks the transition from one state of existence to the next.

Islam teaches that life on earth is an examination-the life to come is the eternal abode where one will reap the fruit of one's endeavours on earth. Death is therefore not to be resisted or fought against, but rather something to be accepted as part of the overall divine plan, there should therefore be no reasoning by the bereaved as to why they have lost their loved one.

For Muslims, the concept of death and the afterlife in Islam is derived from the Qur'an, the final divine message.

At the moment of death, the person knows his or her final destiny; Heaven or Hell. The Qur'an seems to be more concerned to determine the nature of death.

Allah says in the Qur'an: *"Everyone shall taste death. And only on the day of resurrection shall you be paid your wages in full. And whoever is removed away from the fire and admitted to paradise, this person is indeed successful. The life*

*of this world is only the enjoyment of deception:" (Quran 3:185), "Every soul shall have the taste of death "(Quran 29:57).*

In an authentic Hadith, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) said: "Remember the destroyer of pleasures-death".

The knowledge of the reality of death helps people understand it and prepare themselves for its coming. Death is simply a transition state from one world to another, as birth is. No one knows when and where he will die or knows how.

In this respect Allah says in the Quran in Surah (Chapter) Luqman: " Nor does anyone know what it is that he will earn tomorrow: Nor does anyone know in what land he is to die. Verily with Allah is full knowledge and Allah is acquainted with all things" (Quran 31: 34).

Islam is the only religion that explains death in full detail, how it happens, and what Muslims should do before, during, and after the death of a Muslim.

### ***The Final stage and spiritual comfort***

Family members of the dying person and his most pious friends should be informed and should be present at his side to help him turn his thoughts to Allah, encourage him very gently to repent, remind him about all the good deeds that he did, about Allah's mercy, and Allah's forgiveness so that he may anticipate Allah's mercy and Allah's favors.

Certain death customs are almost universally practised by Muslims. Ideally Muslims would wish to die at home. Making death clinical and remote in a hospital setting is not in keeping with the Islamic tradition. The dying person will expect to be visited by friends and relatives, who are encouraged to pray for his or her welfare in the life to come. This is a time when Muslims seek each other's' forgiveness for excesses that may have been inadvertently committed. Members of the immediate family will often stay by the bedside reciting from the Qur'an. Having a copy of the Qur'an on the ward, for those who have not remembered to bring their own, is kindness.

The daily prayers play a pivotal role in the day-to-day life of a Muslim, and prayer assumes an even greater role in times of suffering and distress. Family members will encourage the dying to continue with their prayers as long as they are able to do so. Before the prayer, ablution is performed; bed-bound patients will need help in this respect. Muslims pray in the direction towards

the Ka'ba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Again for the bed-bound, positioning the bed in the direction of Makkah will simplify matters. Having a compass and prayer timetable available would be very useful; a prayer timetable is easily available from most local mosques.

Visiting the sick is a basic duty one Muslim has for another, and is not reserved only for close friends and family. Consequently, the Muslim patient will often have many visitors. For the Muslim, visiting a sick brother or sister in faith is a form of worship. It comes under Islamic etiquette to visit a sick Muslim, to provide him moral support, and to make sure that he or she is well taken care of. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "Feed the hungry, visit the sick, and free the captives".

The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "When you visit a sick please the patient and give him comfort." When the Prophet, peace be upon him, visited a sick person he used to say to him: "Do not worry! It is a means of cleansing (you) of sins, Allah willing." It is preferred to shorten the visits and to make them less frequent as far as possible, lest they should become burdensome for the patient, except when the patient himself desires longer and more frequent visits.

In times of distress or illness, the Muslim finds the greatest solace and comfort in the remembrance of God. The severely ill person, who might be distracted by his pain, greatly appreciates a companion who can read the Qur'an to him and remind him of God. Your assistance in notifying the nearest Islamic Centre or Mosque so that someone could come would be greatly appreciated. When a Muslim patient is dying or has died he/she should be lying in the direction of the Ka'aba. Those who are present near a dying Muslim should be kind and patient. They should never leave him alone rather give him hope, not allowing him to collapse out of pain or panic. They should prompt him very gently (Encouragement without insistence) every now and then to say the Shahada: "La ilaha ella Allah", which means 'There is no God but Allah,' in a very kind and sincere manner as these may be his last words. Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) said : " Help Muslims who are dying to say: ' La ilaha ella Allah' " . They should make Dua' (Supplicate) to Allah to help him go through the situation with ease, and forgive him.

## ***Death, washing and Burial***

When a Muslim dies, the eyes and mouth should be closed and the limbs should be straightened. The body should ideally face in the direction of Makkah. It is a religious requirement that the dead be buried as soon as possible and thus family distress can issuing the death certificate at the earliest. The body will be washed, scented and shrouded in simple unsewn pieces of white cloth. During all these processes the body should be treated with gentleness and respect. A funeral prayer is held in the local mosque, and family and community members follow the funeral procession to the graveyard where a final prayer is said as the deceased is laid to rest. Events occur in rapid succession and often the dead will be buried within 24 hours.

Muslims are always buried, never cremated. Often the members of a funeral committee collect death certificates and make arrangements for funerals in order to take the worry off the immediate family members. The caskets in which the burials are to be carried out are kept by the community and are simple wooden boxes with no decorations. Many purpose built mosques in Australia have a "cold storage" room to preserve the body. Though burial in the Australia is usually in a wooden coffin, according to religion, Muslims prefer to bury their dead without this. Some local authorities allow this practice. Religious law does not allow Muslim women to attend burials, and they do not in practice, even if a female relative or a baby has died. This is as a result of the belief that women are of "faint heart" and will easily break down. Some visit the grave at other times in spite of this practice being religiously "reprehensible. Although graves are dug by gravediggers, the filling in with earth is carried out by the relatives. Graves are dug in such a way that the face of the deceased faces Makkah.

### ***Condolence and weeping over the dead***

It is a Muslim's duty to offer condolences, comfort, and sympathy to the family and the relatives of the deceased.

When offering condolences, words should be chosen carefully and said gently to convey sympathy and to encourage the family and the relatives of the deceased to accept Allah's will and to help them to get back to their normal life. Condolences may be offered to the family and to the relatives of the deceased before, during or after burial for up to three days, but it may be

offered even at a later time if someone did not hear about it or he was far away.

It is recommended to leave after offering condolences to give the family time to take care of their other affairs, assistance may be offered for anything the family may need, and one may stay to help, if asked.

It is Islamic tradition that friends, neighbours and relatives prepare food for the family of the deceased, for the loss of the loved one occupies the family's whole attention.

### ***Mourning for a Deceased***

Mourning over the dead is allowed in Islam, but there is a great difference between what is allowed in Islam and the practice of some Muslims at the present time. Grief at the death of a beloved person is normal, and weeping for the dead is allowed in Islam. What is prohibited is to express grief by wailing, mourning in a loud voice, shrieking, beating the chest and cheeks, tearing hair or clothes, breaking things or scratching faces or saying phrases that make a Muslim lose faith.

The Prophet, peace be upon him, wept on the death of his son, Ibrahim, and said: "The eyes shed tears and the heart feels pain, but we utter only what pleases our Lord.

It is permissible for a woman to mourn for a period of three days on the death of a near relative, provided that her husband does not object to her doing so. It is not permissible for her to mourn for more than three days, except in the case of her husband's death, when the limit is set to four months and ten days, which is a legally prescribed period of waiting or "iddah".

### ***POST-MORTEM EXAMINATIONS AND ORGAN TRANSPLANTS***

When 'new' issues arise that are not explicitly dealt with in the Shariah, Muslim jurists are required to study the issue in question and using the principles enshrined within the Qur'an and Hadith give a legal opinion (fatwa). A fatwa is an opinion and therefore not binding; thus one can expect a broad range of views on a given question, and this is true of post-mortem examinations and

organ transplantation. The majority opinion is that post-mortem examinations are not allowed. One reason is that the examination will inevitably delay the burial. Secondly, Islamic belief holds that it may be possible for the deceased to perceive pain. This is based on the statement of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that 'to break the bone of a dead person is like breaking the bone of a living person'. A small but growing minority hold that post-mortem examinations are permissible. Where the law of the land demands post-mortem examinations i.e. at the coroner's request-Muslims have no choice but to comply. In this case informing the coroner's officer that the deceased is a Muslim may speed up the process since many coroners are aware of Muslim sensitivities. If for any other reason a post-mortem examination is considered desirable, family members must be told they have a free choice in the matter and their views must be respected. With regard to organ transplants, opinion is more divided. For the reasons cited above many oppose the donating of organs. Further, it is argued that since life is a trust, one has no right to 'donate' any part of one's body to someone else. An increasing number of Muslim scholars, however, are of the view that, in cases where it may save life, organ donation is permissible on the basis of the Islamic doctrine that 'necessity allows the prohibited'.

### ***What the Health Care Providers Can Do For Their Muslim Patients***

- ✓ Respect their modesty and privacy. Some examinations can be done over a gown.
- ✓ Provide Halal or Kosher meals.
- ✓ Allow them to pray if they can and read the Qur'an.
- ✓ Inform them of their rights as patients and encourage a living will.
- ✓ Take time to explain tests, procedures and treatment. Many Muslims are new immigrants and may have a language problem.
- ✓ Allow the Imam to visit them.
- ✓ Allow the family to bring food if there are no restrictions.
- ✓ Do not insist on autopsy or organ donation.
- ✓ Always examine a female patient in the presence of another female.
- ✓ Allow the family and Imam to follow Islamic guidelines for preparing the dead body for an Islamic funeral. The female body should be given the same respect and privacy as she was living.
- ✓ Identify Muslim patients with word Muslim in the chart, name tag or bracelet.
- ✓ Provide same sex health care person (MD or RN) if possible.

- ✓ Preferable if no male in the delivery room except the husband.

### ***Additional Islamic Health Practices***

- ✓ Regard for the sanctity of life is an injunction.
  - ✓ Circumcision of the male infants is recommended.
  - ✓ Blood transfusions are allowed after proper screening.
  - ✓ Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not permitted.
  - ✓ Autopsy is not permitted unless required by law.
  - ✓ Maintaining a terminal patient on artificial life support for a prolonged period in a vegetative state is not encouraged.
  - ✓ Abortion is not allowed except to save the mother's life.
  - ✓ Transplantation in general is allowed with some restrictions.
  - ✓ Artificial reproductive technology is permitted between husband and wife only during the span of intact marriage.
  - ✓ While Islam opposes homosexuality, it does not prohibit Muslim physicians from caring for AIDS patients.
  - ✓ Muslims can have a living will or a case manager.
  - ✓ Genetic engineering to cure a disease is acceptable but not cloning.
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