



Cultural Competence Counts

A Minnesota provider illustrates how awareness and education can bridge gaps and improve quality of life for minority populations.

THE PROCESS OF INTEGRATING cultural competency into a health care environment can be extremely challenging; however, it can also open up a world of opportunity.

There is no one single formula to providing care to diverse populations. In most instances, it grows out of a commitment to providing appropriate care to traditionally underserved communities. It means listening to their needs, involving them in creating solutions, and continually adapting to change.

Galtier Health Center, a 125-bed skilled nursing facility in St. Paul, Minn., has been caring for minority populations for more than 20 years. “Diversity is what we do,” says Galtier Administrator Tom Thompson. “We have such a variety of ethnicities in St. Paul, and Galtier wants to ensure that everyone has a place to go when they need help.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Minnesota has the second-largest Hmong population in the country, second only to that in California. The Hmong comprise an ethnic group from the mountainous areas of China, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos.

In 1992, Galtier created a program that caters to Southeast Asian individuals in need of long term care, and catering to the Hmong has been a major focus of the program.

HEATHER TATE is communications specialist at Milwaukee-based Extencare Health Services, the parent company of Galtier Health Center.



Galtier Administrator Tom Thompson and Hmong Liaison Sue Mua flank a *pa dau*, a cloth used to document Hmong culture and life. Incorporating cultural traditions into the Hmong program helps residents feel more at home.

Partnerships Prove Key

Thompson and Sue Mua, Galtier’s Hmong liaison, have made it a top priority to establish cultural competency as an integral, replicable, and sustainable component of the community’s health care system.

Receiving referrals from several local hospitals, Galtier has 16 staff members who speak Hmong and, at present, 32 Hmong residents in their Southeast Asian program.

Cultural traditions can present a variety of challenges in a health care setting. As in many Asian cultures, it is unusual for Hmong families to turn to long term care centers for the care of a loved one. However, as the Hmong population adapts to American society, many families find that home care for



Two Galtier staff members wear traditional clothing to celebrate the Hmong New Year.

an aging parent with serious medical issues is no longer a realistic option.

Mua explains, “There are no words

for, 'nursing home,' in the Hmong language; this makes a conversation about health care difficult, as Hmong may not have any understanding or preconceived notion of what a long term care center truly is."

The decision is increasingly difficult, as many Hmong families believe that

their parents may put a "curse" on them should they decide that long term care is needed. In the Hmong culture, elders are held in high regard, and a curse illustrates their disapproval.

"It is really difficult for them to accept, but they know there is no other way," says Mua.

Galtier works with families to help them understand the necessity for skilled nursing care, along with the benefits of residing in a center where staff speak their language and understand and respect their cultural traditions.

The facility works in partnership with local Hmong organizations and Hmong day programs to educate the Hmong community in advance as to what long term, short term, and rehabilitative care is, leading to a greater understanding and acceptance should they need these services in the future.

Traditional Hmong people view illness from a holistic perspective and believe that when someone is ill, it is both a spiritual and physical problem. They will first seek out the help of a shaman, or healer, to determine if the cause of the illness is spiritual and will require religious or herbal remedies.

However, some Hmong also recognize physical causation. Physical causes require an appropriate response such as taking medication, undergoing various Hmong treatments, or seeking Western medical care.

"Their entire lives, they have used herbal medicine; some feel that Western medication may harm their spirit or cause other ailments to occur," says Mua.

Mua and her staff explain in detail how medicine can help when all other options are exhausted.

They work in collaboration with both a doctor and a shaman to provide all necessary care, including medical and spiritual therapy.

Committee Approach Works

Activities at Galtier can be quite an adventure in the Southeast Asian unit. Many Hmong residents do not read or write, and they oftentimes cannot read the numbers on a bingo card or follow a recipe. However, they love to watch Hmong movies or embroider *pa dau*, a cloth used to document Hmong culture and life.

They also enjoy ball tosses and Hmong stories, but their favorite

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activity is to visit St. Paul's Hmong International Market. The market is something similar to what they might have visited in Laos, offering clothing, fresh produce from local farmers, and traditional Hmong cuisine.

To help brainstorm activities and other issues, Galtier created the Southeast Asian Committee, which includes the administrator, director of nursing, nurse manager, social service director, dietary manager, and Hmong liaison. They meet on a monthly basis to discuss the changing needs of the residents, including activities, dietary needs, and family and resident concerns, among other issues.

Creating A Hmong Menu

Despite the fact that Minnesota has an estimated 75,000 Hmong residents, finding examples of Hmong cooking has not been easy. With a long tradition of oral history, cookbooks featuring Hmong food are rare. Hmong elders do not care for "American" food, but strongly prefer their traditional cuisine and cooking methods.

"For a long time we looked for a Hmong cookbook, but couldn't find one," says Thompson. "We would have to rely on suggestions from Hmong staff and residents. However, one just came out, and we have started to make two recipes from the cookbook each week."

Diet is a major concern among the residents. Though they have come to accept many "American" things, including Western medicine, they are very particular about the food they eat. "We have to have rice available at every meal, and we even have a rice cooker in the Hmong unit, so that it is available at all times," says Thompson. "This is very important in their culture. Once, we ran out of rice, and the residents were so appalled, they wanted to march to the Capitol in protest."

Galtier has created a separate menu for its Southeast Asian residents. Though it is not completely traditional food, it does abide by some of

the traditional beliefs. For example, in Hmong culture, people who are ill will not eat onions because they believe it will exacerbate their condition.

Respecting Traditions

A Hmong Resident Council was created to ensure that all suggestions and

concerns from residents are heard. Many issues, such as diet, have been avoided by asking residents their opinions, beliefs, suggestions, and concerns and working with them to make sure they are comfortable and feel that they are involved in finding solutions to their requests.

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Focus On CAREGIVING

One of the largest celebrations held on the unit is for the Hmong New Year and Harvest in late November or December. The traditional celebration includes singing for ancestors, dancing, and a holiday feast.

Galtier often joins other Hmong associations in the area for their celebrations or holds the celebration in the center, inviting the community and other residents.

They order a special holiday meal from a local traditional Hmong restaurant and make sure to have eggs available for every resident, as they are believed to bring good luck and joy throughout the year.

In Hmong tradition, should a resident become increasingly ill at Galtier, it is not acceptable to speak of it. "Hmong believe that if you say it, it will happen," said Mua. "They are a very superstitious people; you can-

not say that someone may die, as they believe that you have cursed them and it will then become true."

The funeral is the most elaborate of all Hmong rituals. Hmong have a strong faith that after death the soul reincarnates. It is often considered the most important time for practicing rituals in the Hmong community because without following these rituals, it is believed the soul will roam for eternity.

The overall goal of the performed rituals is to guide the soul back on the journey to the after life. Special clothes are worn, and music and singing is used to help the deceased on their journey.

Galtier works to ensure respect for these traditional beliefs.

Galtier has created many partnerships in the St. Paul community that enhance the Southeast Asian program. Mua is a member of the Hmong

American Partnership and the Hmong Leaders Assembly.

Reaching Out

Thompson teaches English as a second language one evening a week through the Southeast Asian Ministry. They work closely with the Hmong Cultural Center and Hmong day programs, including Wingspan, Metro Senior, Volunteers of America, and Hmong Elder Daycare Center. These partnerships aid in both increasing Galtier's knowledge of the Hmong culture and current events and in educating the Hmong community about health care, long term care, and special health issues in the Hmong population.

Galtier has taken many steps to help ensure their residents are not only receiving quality care, but improving their quality of life in a culturally sensitive environment. ■

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