

Diverse health beliefs

All cultural and ethnic groups have concepts related to health and illness, whether they are cultural or individual beliefs, that impact on their health behaviour. These should be considered when communicating with your client.

Health beliefs at the level of culture

The 'health beliefs model' describes three very broad families of beliefs about health that predominates in different regions of the world. The three families are 'biomedical', 'traditional', and 'magico-spiritual'. For a table comparing them, please see the resource manual [CALD communities, sexually transmissible infections and viral hepatitis](#) (MHSS, 2011).

The biomedical family of beliefs emerged in the West and spread via globalisation; this process is ongoing and incomplete. In most settings (including the West) the biomedical model has come to coexist with health beliefs from the other families (such as the belief cancer is caused by negative thoughts or head colds by exposure to low temperatures).

The model should not be used to categorise individual patients or particular communities, as this will result in stereotyping – the failure to recognise individual diversity within groups. It is useful as a starting point for understanding the differences in perspective that can cause breakdowns in cross-cultural communication between clinicians and patients.

Health beliefs at the level of individual patients

Individual understandings about the causation of illness have been shown to predict more of health behaviour than culture-level beliefs (citation).

The medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman recommends clinicians ask eight questions to elicit what he calls 'patient explanatory models', which capture both cultural beliefs and individual aspects of personality and life history (Kleinman & Benson, 2006).

The eight questions are simple enough to use in the clinical setting and avoid the risk of stereotyping that comes with the health beliefs model. The eight questions are:

- What do you call this problem?
- What do you believe is the cause of this problem?
- What course do you expect it to take? How serious is it?
- What do you think this problem does inside your body?
- How does it affect your body and your mind?
- What do you most fear about this condition?
- What do you most fear about the treatment?