

Short Communications

Caring for Muslim Patients - Some Religious Issues

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ABSTRACT

Islam is a universal religion and a comprehensive way of life that cannot be separated from patients. Muslim patients are not just passive recipients of medical decisions, but have their own religious views and beliefs about how they would like to be cared for by the medical profession. With the increasing Muslim population in the west, problems arise when a Muslim patient is admitted to a hospital with non-Muslim health care-giver, particularly related to dietary and nutritional issues. The health team should be aware of the religious prohibitions in Islam such as wine or alcohol, flesh of swine, reptiles, birds with talons, canine animals or scavenging creatures, intoxicants etc. The guidelines presented in this paper would enable the health provider to serve their Muslim patients in the most appropriate manner.

KEYWORDS: Muslim patients, Hospital diet, Forbidden foods

INTRODUCTION

Eating, like any other act of the Muslims, is a matter of worship if done Islamically. Muslims begin and end eating with the name of Allah. Islam reminds Muslims of foods and drinks as a provision of Allah provided to them for survival and for maintaining good health. Muslims will eat only those foods, which are allowed to them in Qur'an. These foods are called halal foods. The production of halal foods has become important, particularly in non-Muslim countries, from a number of viewpoints and hospital diets are no exception.¹ Muslims comprise a substantial number of populations in non-Muslim countries. As an example, the 2001 UK census report shows there were about 1,588,890 of Muslims in UK (2.8 % of the total population and 51.9% of the non-Christian population).² Thousands of them get admitted in hospitals for medical reasons. This fact necessitates know-how on the part of the health professionals to understand what foods are lawful and what are forbidden to the Muslim as per Islamic dietary laws. Only then can health workers provide better health services to the satisfaction of their Muslim patients. Besides that, washing facilities should be made available in toilets for individuals to wash their private parts. If possible, a prayer room should be made available. For bedridden patients, special care should be taken. They may pray in bed and therefore the bed has to be clean. A container

of water should be made available to them whenever they use a bed pan and at meal times. It is preferable that female patients are cared for by females and male patients by males, particularly during confinement. The modesty of a woman must be respected and the husband may wish to be present during childbirth.

Lawful and Forbidden Foods:

All Muslims consider Qur'an the final word of God (Allah). The instructions given in Qur'an are mandatory and unchangeable. Following categories of foods and drinks are forbidden according to the Qur'anic injunctions.³

1. Meat of an animal that dies of itself (carrion). This prohibition also applies to meat of animals or animals dead due to specific causes as mentioned in Qur'an.
i. e. the strangled, the beaten, the fallen, the gored and the one which has been partly eaten by wild beasts.
2. Blood that is poured forth as distinguished from the blood adhering to flesh or other organs. Similarly, bloody meat or any product made with animal blood or blood products are prohibited.
3. Flesh of swine including all the products and by-products prepared from swine.
4. Food on which any other name has been invoked besides that of Allah.
5. Some other dangerous, poisonous filthy animals, reptiles, birds with talons, canine animals or scavenging creatures.

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6. Intoxicant drugs, which cause a person to lose self-control. Other harmful products, which are detrimental to our spiritual, mental and physical health. This may include whole range of new designer drugs and other psychotropic substances that can influence the mind.
7. All other foods except those mentioned above are permitted including seafoods and all types of fish except those without fins or scales (such as shellfish).⁴

Exemption in situational conditions:

Muslims are permitted in Qur'an to eat or drink unlawful foods and drinks under exceptional conditions, which are; (1) by mistake, (2) if one is compelled to do so without willful disobedience and (3) for fear of dying of hunger or disease.⁵

The conclusions of some Qur'anic instructions and those of research studies are given in the following;

1. Offer a halal diet free of alcohol, pork or pork products, or food containing these products, including animal shortening, usually prepared from pork fat.
2. Administer medications that are alcohol-free (also including tooth pastes, mouth wash etc), and pork-free (insulin, heparin, some infant formulas). Remember that alcoholic vanilla extracts contains alcohol and therefore, are forbidden.⁶ However, there is no objection, from the point of view of Islam, in using alcohol as antiseptic or disinfectant. There is no prohibition to using medicines containing a very small measure of alcohol for the purpose of preservation or as solvent if no alternative/ substitute is available. However, foods containing even a little amount of wine are prohibited, including chocolates and drinks or foods tinged with alcohol. The rule of exceptional permissibility is not applicable here due to the lack of the factor of necessity.⁷
3. All those concerned with diets for Muslim patients should know a list of all pork products. For example bacon, ham sausages, etc.⁸
4. The dietitians and nutritionists should read the label of foods carefully before giving it. It should contain 'halal' written on it or other registered monogram. In USA, for example, halal food labels use "M" encircled in crescent.⁶ Moreover, all halal foods should be made available to Muslim patients. If this is not possible, Muslims should be given the choice of

having sea-foods, eggs, fruits and vegetables. The best is to ask the patients about his/her food preferences on religious basis.⁹

5. All kitchen staff should be aware of halal meats or foods. They should use separate utensils for Muslim patients. Similarly, the knife used for slicing pork must not be used to cut anything to be given to a Muslim.⁸
6. Food and medications should be given to patients with the right hand.⁹ If required, feed the patient with your right hand too.¹⁰
7. Hand washing before and after meals is particularly important to Muslims. Bathroom facilities are readily available to ambulant patients; however washing facilities should be made available to bedridden patients at meal times.

Hospital Diets during Ramadan:

For Muslims, fasting during Ramadan is obligatory for healthy adults. Besides Ramadan fasting, some Muslims also keep optional fasts.⁸ The health care team should know that allowing anything to enter through the mouth into the intestine nullifies the fast, therefore any medication that is swallowed will also invalidate the fast. Since a fasting person will not be able to take any mid-day dose, dosage times should be altered so that tablets are taken before the start (sahoor) and at the end of the fast (iftar) or in some cases by switching from short-acting agents to longer-acting ones.¹¹⁻¹³

Muslim patients who can fast during Ramadan must be provided with two main meals: immediately after sunset (called iftari) and an hour before sunrise (called sihri). Dates at the time of iftari should be made available as Muslims all over the world like to break their fasts with dates.

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