



Case Study: Reproductive Health & Christianity

From Tanenbaum's *Medical Manual For Religio-Cultural Competence*

Informed Consent & Patient Decision Making

Generally, Christian patients will make decisions individually, although they may choose to consult members of their faith community. Many will find comfort in the counsel of a trusted spiritual leader if the decision involves sensitive issues, such as what efforts should be made to prolong life after a terminal prognosis.

Jehovah's Witness patients will likely want the elders of their faith community to make important health care decisions. Elders are spiritual leaders charged with organizing the congregation's public ministry, providing religious instruction, and conducting spiritual counseling. The Jehovah's Witness tradition is highly hierarchical, and elders are usually very influential in the lives of congregants.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & FAMILY PLANNING

Beliefs on reproductive health and family planning vary greatly according to the secular, liberal, or conservative orientation of a given denomination or congregation.

Almost all denominations of Christianity view pre- and extramarital sex as sinful and teach that sex is only appropriate within the constraints of marriage. Homosexuality is also considered to be sinful by many. Some denominations accept lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual members as long as they abstain from sexual activity, while an increasing number accept them without that proscription. Other denominations are reconsidering their positions.

Teachings on family planning vary widely. Some Christians view all forms of family planning as acceptable. Others adamantly oppose all forms of intervention, including artificial contraception, infertility treatment, and voluntary sterilization, believing that God's plan for humanity is for sexual intercourse to be procreative and that contraception disrupts God's natural plan. Most Christian denominations teach abstinence until marriage; discussing premarital sexual relations may cause discomfort for more conservative Christians, or may be problematic for minors.

Although most denominations of Christianity have clear positions on matters of reproductive health and family planning, individual believers are often at odds with the official teachings of their churches. It is critical to discuss a particular patient's beliefs with him/her.

Most Christian denominations are also opposed to abortion, believing that life begins at conception; this means that abortion is equivalent to infanticide. Denominations that have officially announced their opposition to abortion include:

- Roman Catholic (also officially opposed to contraception);
- Eastern Orthodox Christian;
- Episcopalian; and
- Anglican.

In other traditions, abortion is strongly discouraged but is accepted as a last-resort option or when the woman's life is threatened; these include:

- Lutheran;
- Methodist; and
- Presbyterian.

Christians with strong antiabortion sentiments may also be reluctant to have prenatal testing. Again, it is important to remember that there is wide variety among believers' attitudes, and it is important that providers allow patients to express their personal beliefs and preferences.

PREGNANCY & BIRTH

While most Christian traditions readily access medical care in connection with pregnancy and birth, some denominations may require special consideration.

Because blood transfusions are strictly prohibited for Jehovah's Witnesses, extra care should be taken with women during labor and with their infants to ensure that the infants do not become anemic. If providers must draw blood from the baby, a minimum amount should be taken and any extra blood from the sample should be disposed and not used for testing.

Some Christian Scientists prefer to have their children at home, aided by midwives. Those who go to a hospital to give birth will likely wish to minimize the use of medication during labor; most will also wish to return home the same day as the delivery. However, if it is medically necessary for the infant to remain in the hospital, many Christian Scientists will consent.

Different traditions have differing beliefs surrounding the meaning of baptism. Only some denominations have the practice of baptizing at birth, so it is important to discuss baptismal preferences with parents. Denominations that baptize infants include Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, and Roman Catholic; additionally, the Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ sometimes baptize infants.

Most denominations that baptize at birth have a formal ceremony in the first few months of the child's life; this is typically done in a church. If a child must be baptized in the hospital, a private room should be provided for the family.

If the birth is very premature or if the infant is seriously ill, some Christians may wish to have their babies baptized by clergy shortly after the birth, believing that this is necessary for the baby's well-being in the afterlife. In many denominations, baptism is considered necessary for salvation:

- Jehovah's Witness;
- Pentecostal;
- Revivalist;
- Roman Catholic; and
- Seventh-day Adventist.

In contrast, most Orthodox and Protestant denominations teach that baptism is only a symbolic ritual or outward sign of one's membership into the Christian community with no implications for one's eternal salvation. Members of these traditions may be less likely to request infant baptism if the infant is ill.

There is no official religious ceremony that is performed universally for Christian miscarriages. Some Christians will want to have their baby blessed and/or baptized by clergy, while some will follow denominational teaching that baptism is a sacrament only for the living. The parents may also wish to have a naming service.

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