

Trigger Topic: Acceptance of Drugs & Procedures

What's a Trigger Topic?

Tanenbaum's Trigger Topics create a practical framework to understand how patients' religious, spiritual, and cultural beliefs and practices impact their health care. Given the tremendous diversity between and within faith traditions, it is not possible to learn everything about every religious belief or practice encountered in a health care setting. Instead, health care professionals can better understand how religion and spirituality intersect with health care through the Trigger Topics. This helps providers proactively and respectfully address patient concerns as they relate to their religious beliefs.

Trigger Topic: Acceptance of Drugs and Procedures

The patient refuses specific drugs and procedures due to religious restrictions (such as abstaining from one or more ingredients), exhibits a preference to use alternative medicine, or has religious dietary objections.

Relevant **Competencies for Respectful Communication**

- Be curious and ask respectfully
- Address behavior, not belief
- Avoid assumptions

Questions to Ask/Consider

- Ask: Do you object to any medications for religious or cultural reasons? (e.g., drugs that contain alcohol, narcotics, or are there other forbidden substances)?
- Ask: Do you object to any procedures or courses of treatment for religious or cultural reasons (e.g., surgery, medical imaging, or chemotherapy)?
- Consider: What alternatives can be explored with the patient/their family?

Case Examples

Buddhism

A Buddhist patient with Parkinson's disease refuses medication that will alter his brain chemistry.

- **Background:** One of the Five Precepts of Buddhist tradition calls for abstention from substances that "cloud the mind", so some Buddhists may be hesitant or unwilling to take a medication believed to alter their consciousness. Some Buddhists may also prefer to meditate to ease pain or other symptoms before or instead of taking medication. Many Buddhists are vegetarian and may be unwilling to take medications that contain animal byproducts.¹
- **Recommendations:** With progressive illnesses such as Parkinson's, the use of medication to treat disease symptoms changes along with the illness. Therefore, it is important to reassess the impact of a patient's religious beliefs and practices regularly throughout their treatment. Religious beliefs may also impact treatment differently as a patient's condition changes. Ask open-ended, curious questions to assess and reassess the patient's willingness to use

medications to treat their illness. Provide information about any available medical alternatives. It may be helpful for the patient to speak to pastoral care or their Buddhist spiritual leader who may be a Buddhist master, monk, nun, or revered layperson depending on the patient's Buddhist tradition and beliefs.

Christianity - Catholic

A Catholic patient is reluctant to receive a recommended vaccine that was developed using fetal cell lines.

- **Background:** The Catholic Church teaches that life begins at conception and does not permit abortion. Certain vaccines were initially developed from laboratory cell lines derived from aborted fetuses. Although the vaccines themselves contain no fetal cells, some Catholics seek to avoid vaccines associated with abortion. The Catholic Church's official position is that Catholics are permitted to use fetal cell line vaccines when no reasonable alternatives exist. The Catholic Church holds that the risk to public health from not vaccinating outweighs the moral concern about vaccine origins, however Catholics are free to make their own decisions.²
- **Recommendations:** If possible, offer an alternative vaccine that does not use fetal cell lines. If no alternative is available, explain this to the patient. It is important to describe the risks and benefits of any available medical alternatives to patients so they can make an informed decision. The patient may wish to speak to their priest before proceeding. If the patient indicates that they wish to speak to their priest, offer to follow up with them after they have had this conversation, or offer to connect them to the pastoral care team if your facility has one.

Islam

A Muslim family objects to physicians using a porcine skin graft to treat a burn on their daughter's arm.³

- **Background:** Islam teaches that certain foods have been declared by Allah to be either halal (permissible) or haram (forbidden). Pork, or anything containing pig products (e.g., lard) is haram. For some Muslims, the use of porcine material may be permissible to save a life, though many Muslim patients will refuse all porcine products. When available, a non-porcine alternative is preferred.
- **Recommendations:** When animal derived surgical implants or materials are being considered, it is essential to communicate this with the family to identify any religious or cultural concerns. A non-porcine alternative should be offered if available. If such an alternative is not available, this should be explained to the patient and family. Acknowledge that for the patient and family, adherence to their faith is not optional, and may be what they believe to be best for their child. The patient and family may wish to consult with an imam or a member of the pastoral care team before deciding how to proceed. Religious leaders should meet with the family and physician together to avoid misunderstandings regarding the patient's condition, proposed treatment, and religious beliefs.

For more information on this and other Trigger Topics, email healthcare@tanenbaum.org or visit tanenbaum.org.

¹ More information: pg. 104 of [*The Medical Manual for Religio-Cultural Competence*](#)

² More information: pg. 6 of [*Vaccines and Our Health*](#)

³ Linnard-Palmer, L. (2006). *When parents say no: Religious and cultural influences on pediatric healthcare treatment*. Indianapolis, IN: V.G. Reed & Sons.