

INTRODUCTION

For many of us, a stay in hospital is a traumatic experience. We may feel lonely, uncomfortable, disorientated or frightened. For carers, knowledge of and sensitivity towards a patient's religious, ethnic or cultural background can help our patients feel much more at ease during their hospital stay, and so speed their recovery.

This brochure gives a very brief overview of the religious and cultural factors that may influence the outlook of Jewish patients in the hospital. We hope that it will sensitise carers to the specific needs and expectations that they may encounter in dealing with their Jewish patients. This, we believe, will benefit both the carers themselves and the people whom they serve.

ONE JUDAISM — MANY JEWS

Though Judaism is a single religion, it is important to recognize that the Jewish people are not a homogeneous group. There are approximately 45,000 Jews in Victoria, but these thousands of Jews may or may not be affiliated to any of the hundreds of Jewish organizations which exist in the State: Synagogues, political organizations, cultural clubs, sporting associations, welfare agencies and special interest groups. Some Jews may consider themselves religious, others cultural or secular. "Religious" Jews may be affiliated to Progressive, moderate Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox (*Frum*: "observant") Synagogues. Secular Jews may be supporters of Israel, or aligned to Jewish political causes, or simply keen on Jewish culture.

Jewish people come from communities scattered all around the world: from Central Europe (called *Ashkenazi*), North Africa or the Middle East (called *Sephardi*), Britain, Russia or South Africa. The cultural diversity of the Jewish community of Victoria makes it hard for anyone to prejudge the expectations or needs of individual patients with regard to religious observance or to dietary laws. When in doubt, it is always best to ask.

JEWISH FESTIVALS

The pattern of the Jewish year plays a powerful role in the life of many Jewish people. Even the least observant Jew will often attend Synagogue over the "Days of Awe" (the period of the Jewish new year) or celebrate with a ritual meal at home during the Festival of Passover (called the *Pesach Seder*).

Since the Jewish festivals focus heavily on the family and community, patients in hospital may feel isolated and low-spirited at these times. Some of them may have never missed joining in a Seder Meal during Passover or hearing the sound of the *Shofar* (Ram's Horn) on the Jewish New Year. This can have a profound effect on their attitude or behaviour over these days, and a sympathetic response from the caring staff can be of great help.

The commonly observed Jewish Festivals and Holydays are:

February — March

Purim (based on the biblical Scroll of Esther)

April

Pesach (Passover, celebrating the exodus from Egypt)

May — June

Shavuot (Weeks, celebrating the giving of the 10 Commandments at Mount Sinai).

September — October

Rosh Hashana (New Year), *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), *Sukkot* (Festival of Booths), *Simchat Torah* (Rejoicing with the Torah).

December

Chanukah ("Festival of Lights", lasting eight days)

SHABBAT

Every week has a festival, the celebration of the Sabbath (*Shabbat*; from Friday evening till Saturday night). Shabbat is introduced by the lighting of candles and a home celebration around the dinner table. For many it is a day of rest enjoyed with family and friends. Some patients may strictly observe a rule not to "work" on Shabbat. This can include tasks such as writing or initiating the flow of electricity (i.e. flipping a light switch, pressing a call bell, using an automatic sensor activated door, etc.).

FOODS AND FASTS

Food is a central feature of Judaism, and *Kashrut* (Dietary Laws or keeping Kosher) plays a crucial role in the lives of many Jews. There is, however, a wide spectrum of practice relating to keeping kosher, from a strict refusal to eat anything that is not prepared under Rabbinic supervision (for example, eating only "Kosher meals-on-wheels") to an avoidance of specific foods like pork or shell fish.

Despite these rules or perhaps because of them, Jewish people take great delight in eating, and generally carry their tastes in foods from their countries of origin here to Australia.

Each of the Festivals has special foods associated with it. For example: poppy-seed pastries on Purim; doughnuts and potato pancakes (*Latkes*) on Chanukah, dairy foods and cheese cake on Shavuot. For Jewish people, it is a special treat to enjoy these foods in their proper season.

Judaism also has some important fast days, especially Yom Kippur, which is a full 25 hour fast, avoiding all food or drink (including water). Many Jews, who have never in their life missed a Yom Kippur fast, would be loathe to eat or even swallow medicines on this day.

Pesach has a special role in relation to food. For the full week of the festival observant Jews will give up all products made with flour, bread, or pasta. They will replace these foods with an unleavened cracker called *Matzah*. Again, many Jews would feel distressed if they were unable to eat *Matzah* over this period.

THE JEWISH PAST

Jewish people are deeply influenced by the past; both their personal past and the history of their community. Many will have moving memories of childhood experiences when they celebrated Shabbat or the festivals with their families, and these memories can trigger profound reactions in the foreign setting of the hospital. Conversely, some Jewish people will have long submerged experiences of trauma, and these may be brought to the surface by illness or distress.

The Melbourne Jewish community has one of the highest proportions of Holocaust survivors in the world. Some of these people may have fled before the War began, while others lived through the horrors of the camps in places such as Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen. The Holocaust (called *Shoah*) is never far from Jewish consciousness in our era, and memories or disturbing thoughts related to it can emerge at any time while a patient is under hospital care.

In a different way, the establishment of the modern State of Israel has also touched Jewish people deeply. Many of Melbourne's Jewish population are Zionists, many have relations in Israel, and many have actually lived in Israel at one time or another. Attachments to Israel can also be manifested by patients in hospital.

FAMILY ISSUES

The image of the ideal family is very strong among Jews. Of course, few families achieve the perfection of this in real life. In reality, Jewish families suffer from all the pains, stresses and behavioural issues that are found in society at large. But because the ideal family image is so strong within Judaism, it is often hard for Jewish people to admit that their family "deviates" from the ideal. This is especially significant when people are in hospital.

Many Jewish patients will not have the family backup they need during their stay in hospital. Some patients may be upset at the absence of family members, or by lack of support from children or others. Older Holocaust survivors may not have any family alive or present in Australia. Special family circumstances can exacerbate confused or angry feelings in a patient, for example, unresolved issues over an interfaith marriage within the family. Many Jewish families have experienced arguments (called *Broiguses* in Yiddish) which can go on for years. Some patients may have frustrations or feelings of disappointment with other members of the family, and these feelings can influence their outlook or their ability to recover from illness.

Again, it is crucial for carers to be aware of these influences on their Jewish patients.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

The circle of life is at the heart of many Jews' participation in their Jewish culture. Because Jewish families are often so close, if patients are deprived of a family celebration (*Simcha*) or are unable to gather at a funeral, they can be enormously upset. Sometimes, hospital staff could be more aware of the need to acknowledge the deep significance of these rites to their patients.

These are the principal Jewish life rituals:

Birth

Brit Milah (Religious Circumcision) for boys, and a naming ceremony in Synagogue for girls.

Coming of Age

Bar Mitzvah for boys and *Bat Mitzvah* for girls; these ceremonies take place at the beginning of the teen years.

Marriage

Popularly called a *Chuppah* (Canopy); under which the ceremony takes place. A Chuppah can only take place between two Jews.

Death

The Jewish funeral is normally a burial service. If Jewish patients have to miss any of these significant moments in the family due to illness or disability, they may feel especially upset or depressed.

In case of death, please contact one of the following:

Bet-Olam Jewish Funerals (*for patients connected with a Progressive Synagogue or community*)
(03) 9883 6237

Melbourne Chevra Kadisha (*for patients connected with an Orthodox Synagogue or community*)
(03) 9534 0208

Adass Israel Chevra Kadisha (*for patients connected with an Ultra-Orthodox Synagogue or community*)
(03) 9525 9407



CARING FOR JEWISH PATIENTS



A RESOURCE FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV)
9272 5566—info @jccv.org.au—www.jccv.org.au

Adapted by Rabbi Yoseph Nerenberg, JCCV Pastoral Care Reference Group, with permission from Rabbi Fred Morgan, Temple Beth Israel