



BAHÁ'Í

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GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS INTERACTING WITH PATIENTS OF THE BAHÁ'Í RELIGION AND THEIR FAMILIES

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions. Its founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), is regarded by Bahá'ís as the most recent in the line of Messengers of God that stretches back beyond recorded time and that includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad. The Bahá'í Faith is recognized as being the second most widespread religion in the world next to Christianity. The Bahá'í membership in the United States reflects the racial and cultural diversity of the American population. As of February 2002, there were approximately 147,000 Bahá'ís in the United States and close to 4,000 Bahá'ís residing in the metropolitan Chicago area.

The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for its unification in one global society. God, Bahá'u'lláh said, has set in motion historical forces that are breaking down traditional barriers of race, class, creed, and nation and that will, in time, give birth to a universal civilization. The principal challenge facing the peoples of the earth is to accept the fact of their oneness and to assist the processes of unification.

There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith and elected bodies known as local Spiritual Assemblies administer the affairs of the community. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í of the United States is the administrative body for the Bahá'ís of the U.S. and its headquarters is located in the vicinity of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote over one hundred letters and books, which comprise the principal scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith. In these texts are found the principles, teachings, prayers and laws that guide the Bahá'í community. Bahá'u'lláh's literary legacy includes the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ("The Most Holy Book"), the repository of his laws; the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* ("The Book of Certitude"), an exposition of essential teachings on the nature of God and religion; *The Hidden Words*, a collection of brief utterances aimed at the edification of men's souls; *The Seven Valleys*, a mystic treatise that "describes the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence"; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, his last major work; as well as innumerable prayers, meditations, exhortations, and epistles.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Bahá'u'lláh taught that there is one God whose successive revelations of His will to humanity has been the chief civilizing force in history. The agents of this process have been the Divine

Messengers whom people have seen chiefly as the founders of separate religious systems but whose common purpose has been to guide the human race to spiritual and moral maturity. Humanity is now coming of age. It is this that makes possible the unification of the human family and the building of a peaceful, global society. Among the many principles which the Bahá'í Faith promotes as vital to the achievement of this goal are:

- the abandonment of all forms of **prejudice**
- assurance to women of full **equality** of opportunity with men
- recognition of the **unity** and relativity of religious truth
- the elimination of extremes of **poverty and wealth**
- the realization of **universal education**
- the responsibility of each person to engage in **independent search** for truth
- the establishment of a global **commonwealth of nations**
- recognition that true religion is in harmony with reason and the pursuit of knowledge through **science**
- the adoption of a universally agreed-upon **auxiliary language** and script

CULTURE AND CELEBRATIONS

As a worldwide community with more than 2,100 ethnic and tribal groups in over 230 countries and territories, the Bahá'í Faith is among the most culturally diverse bodies of people. The structures that govern Bahá'í community life are designed to both enable this diversity and maintain the essential unity of the Faith.

The centerpiece of Bahá'í community life is the ***Nineteen-Day Feast***. It consists of a devotional, a consultative, and a social portion. Every nineteen days the Bahá'ís meet for a few hours, for devotions, consultation and fellowship. As with marriages, burials and other elements of Bahá'í community life, there exists considerable variation across the globe in the cultural details of the basic structure of the Feast.

Bahá'ís worldwide also have a unique Bahá'í calendar, observe a ***Fast*** (March 2 – 21) and celebrate the following nine Holy Days, among others, during which work is suspended:

- ***Naw-Rúz (March 21)***: Bahá'í New Year's Day. Astronomically fixed to commence the Bahá'í year on the spring equinox.
- ***Festival of Ridván (April 21-May 2)***: Annual Bahá'í festival commemorating the 12 days (April 21-May 2, 1863) when Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His mission as God's messenger for this age in a garden called Ridván (Paradise) in Baghdad, Iraq. Work is suspended on the first (April 21), ninth (April 29), and twelfth (May 2) days.
- ***Declaration of the Báb (May 23)***: Bahá'í commemoration of May 23, 1844 when the Báb, the prophet-herald of the Bahá'í Faith, announced in Shiraz, Persia, that he was the herald of a new messenger of God.
- ***Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh (Anniversary, May 29)***: Bahá'í observance of the anniversary of the death in exile of Bahá'u'lláh on May 29, 1892.
- ***Martyrdom of the Báb (July 9)***: Bahá'í observance of the anniversary of the execution by a firing squad, July 9, 1850, in Tabriz, Persia, of the 30-year-old Mirza Ali Muhammad, the Báb.
- ***Birth of the Báb (October 20)***: Bahá'í observance of the anniversary of the birth, October 20, 1819, in Shiraz, Persia, of Siyyid Ali Muhammad, who later took the title of "the Báb" or "the Gate."

- ***Birth of Bahá'u'lláh (November 12):*** Bahá'í observance of the anniversary of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh (born Mirza Husayn Ali) on November 12, 1817, in Nur, Persia. Bahá'u'lláh means the "Glory of God".

BELIEFS RELATED TO HEALTH CARE

From a Bahá'í viewpoint, true health extends beyond the physical. For an individual and a community to be healthy, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical well being are all required. As humanity's understanding increases regarding the connection between the spiritual and emotional well-being of a patient and how this can affect their physical health, physicians and other health care providers will come to appreciate the benefit of understanding the beliefs and religious practices of their patients in order to provide optimal care for them.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that individuals should seek the assistance of competent physicians for medical treatment. Since the Bahá'í Faith teaches that true science and religion cannot contradict each other, the application of medical and technological advances does not contradict Bahá'í beliefs.

Physicians

Consultation with expert doctors for somatic and psychological conditions is strongly encouraged.

Prescription Drugs

There are no limitations on prescribed drugs for Bahá'ís.

Organ Transplants

Bahá'ís can receive and donate organs.

Amputations

Bahá'ís are free to have an amputation if required.

Religious Objects

Bahá'ís may wish to have symbols such as a picture of a nine-pointed star present in their hospital room. It should be placed in a position of respect. Other objects may include a photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, a prayer book, or other books containing Bahá'í Writings. No special room is needed for prayers.

MEDICAL & NURSING CARE

The use of blood transfusions, organ transplants, or advanced technology and engineering is not prohibited. In care giving, the patient's spiritual needs and dignity should be supported whenever possible. Whether it is preferable that a same-sex doctor be assigned to a Bahá'í is entirely a matter of personal choice.

Since from a Bahá'í point of view, the soul is present from conception, abortion is strongly discouraged. It is not considered acceptable as a means of birth control, but allowable for medical reasons.

SPIRITUAL CARE/PRAYERS

Bahá'ís pray daily and believe sickness can be healed both through the use of medicine and the use of prayer. As there is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, the believers are free to pray and consult about making medical decisions according to the Bahá'í teachings. The local governing body (Local Spiritual Assembly) of the Bahá'ís, or the national governing council (National Spiritual Assembly) may be contacted for advice on the appropriate course in order to keep the Bahá'í laws.

It is appropriate for members of the clergy of other faiths to visit the Bahá'ís. Readings from the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, the Bible, the Koran, other holy books or inspirational texts may be read at the bedside of an ill Bahá'í.

DIET/FOOD PREFERENCE & PRACTICES

There are no dietary restrictions for Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í writings, however, point to nutrition as an essential factor in maintaining and restoring good health. Should a Bahá'í require hospitalization during the period of fasting, a physician should be consulted for information regarding possible health issues, and to provide guidance for the patient. During the Fasting period (March 20th – 21st), Bahá'ís between the ages of 15 to 70 years old, do not eat or drink between dawn and sunset, except in the case of pregnancy, travel or ill health.

Individual Bahá'ís are free to use their judgment, depending on their illness, as to whether to participate in the various practices and commemorations on the Bahá'í calendar such as the **Fast**, and to seek the counsel of a competent physician in cases of uncertainty.

END OF LIFE CARE

Advance Directives

The decision to remove or withhold life support in medical cases where intervention prolongs life in disabling illness must be left to those responsible, notably the patient/surrogate and the physician.

Burial

The body of the departed should be treated with honor and respect, and the family or local governing body of the Bahá'í should be contacted. There are no formal last rites for Bahá'ís. However, prayers may be offered by family, friends, or hospital clergy.

The burial should take place within an hour's travel time from the place of death. There is no restriction on the mode of travel for the journey. There is no provision as to the time limit before burial. However, the sooner it takes place the more fitting and preferable. Embalming of the body is to be avoided. When circumstances do not permit interment of the body soon after passing, or when it is a legal requirement, the body may be embalmed provided the process delays the natural decomposition of the body for a short time only. Autopsies are permitted.

At their discretion, family members may participate in preparing the body for burial. It should be carefully washed and placed in a shroud of white cloth, preferably silk. If a Bahá'í burial ring is available, it should be placed on the finger of the deceased.

Cremation

According to Bahá'í teachings, cremation is strongly discouraged.

Amputations

There are no special provisions regarding disposal of amputated limbs or removed organs. Individual organs and amputated limbs may be cremated or buried.

Embryos/Fetuses

Since Bahá'ís believe that the soul is present from conception, the embryo/fetus should be treated with respect regardless how young it is. The burial of embryos/fetuses should be left to the discretion of the parents whenever possible. It should not be incinerated if this can be prevented.

Anatomical Gifts

If Bahá'ís choose to leave their body to medical science it must be treated with respect. Remains should not be cremated as this is against Bahá'í teachings. As described in the *End of Life* section, the remains should not be buried more than one hour's journey from the place of death. These specific requests must be communicated on the *Anatomical Gift Association of Illinois* enrollment form¹.

RESOURCES/REFERENCES

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States
Office of Public Information
1320 19th Street NW, Suite 701
Washington DC 20036
Phone: 202/466-9870,
Fax: 202/466-9873
E-mail: opi@usbnc.org

Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Chicago
c/o Bahá'í Center
3321 S. Calumet Avenue
Chicago, IL 60616-3933
E-mail: chibahai@pipeline.com

Health for Humanity
467 Jackson Avenue
Glencoe, IL 60022
Phone: 847/835-5088;
E-mail: Health@usbnc.org

Official website of the Bahá'ís of the United States:
www.us.Bahai.org

Official website of the worldwide Bahá'í community:
www.Bahai.org

¹ The Anatomical Gift Association of Illinois (AGAI), formerly known as The Demonstrator's Association, is the sole, official organization which manages the body donor program for the medical institutions in Illinois. The AGAI is a not-for-profit corporation authorized to procure, prepare, preserve, and distribute human remains for the purpose of medical education and research at these institutions. They can be reached at 312/733-5283 or 1-800-734-5283, www.anatomical-gift.org.

Excerpts from Bahá'í sacred texts can be found at: <http://www.bahai.org/section5.html>

The following books, as well as many more Bahá'í publications, are available for purchase from the Bahá'í Distribution Service: 1-800-999-9019

General Information

The Bahá'í Faith- An Introduction by Gloria Faizi

The Bahá'í Faith- The Emerging Global Religion by William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin

Authoritative Texts

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, The Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Physical Health

The Throne of the Inner Temple compiled by Elias Zohoori

Ageing- Challenges and Opportunities

Alzheimer's Disease- An Eclipse before Sunset by A.M. Ghadirian, M.D.

Comfort in Times of Difficulty

Fire & Gold- Benefiting From Life's Tests compiled by Brian Kurzius

Life, Death and Immortality- The Journey of the Soul compiled by Hayes, Fisher, Hill & Cassidy

Bahá'í Burial and Funeral Practices

A Guide to Bahá'í Funeral and Burial Practices by Natalie M. Reyes

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