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Preface

In the Hippocratic writings one finds the follow: *“Observe the nature of each country; diet; customs; the age of the patient; speech; manners; fashion; even his silence...one has to study all these signs and analyze what they portend.”* These words are as true today in Canadian society as when they were written some three millennia ago. These words serve as reminders to health professionals that in order to help the suffering, one must fully appreciate the context and the culture of those that they seek to help. To do otherwise will simply limit the effectiveness of care, and in the long run will make the challenge of working with communities that much more difficult. The words also serve to find common ground between “western” medicine and health practices of eastern philosophies. Neither east nor west is exotic or peculiar; the cultures and practices in each must be understood and seen in their context. The medical practices in each must be examined within the context of effective treatment and care.

Canada is a country of immigration. It has richly benefited from the contribution of those individuals of Chinese heritage whose contributions span many generations of the Canadian Mosaic. Together with other Canadians, they have helped create Canada as a model to the world of how cultures and peoples can work together to the mutual benefit of all.

Chinese customs, religion, and health practices are rich and complex and have stood the test of time over many millennia. They have served their people well, and can also serve as knowledge to others. This manual will serve as an important resource for health professionals who choose to expand their own understanding, and to better serve those of Chinese background. The philosophies, traditions, cultural norms and practices of Chinese origin are carefully described, with case examples to facilitate discussions to further explore the variations within the community. The manual will serve as both a reference book and as a resource for workshops. Health professionals are well advised to take full advantage of the opportunity that this manual makes available. In both eastern and western medicine and health care, people have updated their knowledge, skills, values and practices. One should consider carefully the context of health care and medical practices, today and yesterday.

It is said that in learning of others, we learn of ourselves. This publication will afford health professionals an opportunity to explore a fuller understanding of health and healing, challenge pre-conceived notions and biases and help health professionals better understand health needs in a cultural context. It will serve as a valuable resource to any health professional interested in broadening their perspective and in providing more sensitive and appropriate health care service.

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Forward

This handbook was conceived as a means of helping health care providers understand Chinese attitudes, beliefs and behaviours relative to the health, medical and rehabilitation needs and services of their Chinese Canadian clients. It fulfills this expectation admirably through the use of specific examples which are linked to the experience of immigration, language and culture as well as Chinese philosophy.

What is fascinating is the fact that while some of the issues which arise are unique to Chinese culture, many are *not* unique to the Chinese population, but have a much wider application. Readers who have experience in multicultural settings will rapidly realize that values such as strong family ties, respect for senior family members, protection of children well into adulthood and abhorrence of euthanasia are common to many “traditional cultures”. Other behaviours are related to being a new immigrant, or to the lack of familiarity with accepted practice in the new environment — experiences which are common to many newcomers. The handbook also addresses the challenge of conveying information through an interpreter, whether a family member or someone else, and how to optimize clear communication between the client and service provider.

The goal of the handbook is to sensitize the reader and encourage an atmosphere of understanding so that the individual client and family are seen within their culture and experience; at the same time, the health care providers must recognize that they must operate within the bounds of their profession. Offering reasons why clients and families behave the way they do, the handbook gives suggestions for the health care providers not only in terms of understanding, but also in managing, difficult situations.

Health services are most effective when they are culturally appropriate and respectful of the clients’ attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. The handbook stresses the principles of seeking information, and listening carefully to the responses so as to achieve better treatment, planning and improved compliance, in short, a more satisfactory outcome for all.

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