CONNECTING CULTURE AND CARE



Introducing Chinese elders

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CHINESE?

People who identify with Chinese ethnicity may stem from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or other countries. Some families are new to New Zealand, others have lived here for generations.

THINKING ABOUT HEALTH

Chinese people are very diverse – with differences across nationalities, generations, education, and whether they were born and raised in New Zealand, as well the little individual differences that make us all unique. For more traditional Chinese elders culture may influence how they think about health:

- Some people may have a Chinese perspective on the balances involved in health (yin and yang) and the life force (chi) that flows through the body.
- Some people may use traditional remedies and treatments alongside Western medicine. Some treatments may leave round marks (cupping) or striped marks (coining) that can be mistaken for abuse.
- Some Chinese elders may generally be very active and try to keep healthy, yet when they are sick they may feel that their role is to be looked after. They may not be familiar with the concept of active rehabilitation.

Simple tips

Welcome family involvement

Chinese cultures place a high value on respecting older family members and caring well for them. It may be important to some people that their family members are involved in decisions.

Use their preferred name

In Chinese the family name is said first, followed by the given name, and these are run together. Check how the person would like to be addressed rather than relying on what is said in the notes.

Check in

People may nod and agree to be polite, even if they don't intend to take the advice. It would be impolite to disagree with someone in authority like a doctor. If in doubt check in.

Find out about favourite foods

People will eat more when food is familiar. Traditionally Chinese people will not eat much diary (due to lactose intolerance), and tend to eat rice and noodles rather than bread and pasta. A common comfort food is a rice porridge called congee, which can be eaten at any meal. Chinese elders may chose foods according to their traditional qualities as 'hot' or 'cold' to balance yin and yang.

Understanding dementia

Traditionally there is often considerable stigma attached to dementia. The Mandarin word for dementia is “chidai” which is also used as a rude term for “dim-witted”. Chinese elders may not be comfortable discussing dementia.

However people may accept memory changes. Chinese elders may talk about the cognitive changes associated with dementia as being due to ageing or “over-using the brain”.

> “My family thought that my mum got old and forgot things; my dad thought she was crazy and it was too shameful to talk about.

Some helpful phrases

Language	“Hello”		“Thank you”		“Goodbye”	
	Phrase	Pronunciation	Phrase	Pronunciation	Phrase	Pronunciation
Mandarin	**Ni hao**	Nee-how	**Xie xie**	Shieh-shieh	**Zai jian** [or] **Bai bai**	Dzai jee-en [or] Bye bye
Cantonese	**Nei-hou**	Ley-ho	**Doh-je**	Door-chair	**Joi-gin**	Joy-gee-n

The two main Chinese languages are Mandarin and Cantonese. Mandarin is widely spoken in Mainland China and Taiwan, while Cantonese is common in Hong Kong. There are also several dialects as well.

You may want to listen online to hear how the words are pronounced to practice. The intonation (up and down) of the words can make a difference to meaning. Have fun with trying the words out and don't be shy. You will sound awkward at first, but people will guess what you are trying to say!

Remember everyone is different. Some Chinese New Zealanders may have health beliefs and wishes that are closest to mainstream ‘kiwi’ culture, especially those whose families migrated several generations ago.

If you would like to know more about working with people from different cultural and language backgrounds including Chinese, you may like to check out eCALD from Waitemata District Health Board (www.ecald.com). Dementia Australia also have a booklet on “Perceptions of dementia in ethnic communities” which includes Chinese communities (www.dementia.org.au). These resources contributed to this introduction.