

Cultural Competency in Health Care



Culture shapes how people experience their world. It's a vital component of how health care services are delivered and received.

Culturally competent health care goes beyond speaking another language or recognizing people's cultural symbols. It's rooted in mutual respect and means being open to learning more about patients and their cultures, and acknowledging potential biases we may have. By delivering culturally competent health care, providers promote health equity and reduce health disparities.

Providers who participate in the BlueCareSM, TennCare*Select* and CoverKids networks agree not to discriminate in the quality of services and treatments provided to patients of all cultural backgrounds. They also agree to be willing and able to treat all patients.

In this guide, we share more about what it means to deliver culturally competent care and resources you may find useful. We hope you find the information helpful.

Important Definitions

Health equity is achieved when every person has the opportunity to achieve their full health potential, regardless of social position or other socially determined circumstances.¹ Some factors that may limit a person's access to health care and good health practices are:

- › Racial and ethnic discrimination
- › Inadequate housing or lack of housing
- › Lack of access to quality education
- › Unsafe environments
- › Income and wealth gaps

Culture is the "... sum total of values, beliefs, standards, languages, thinking patterns, behavioral norms, communication styles, etc. of a group of people, institutions or organizations that guides decisions and actions and is transmitted from one generation to another."²

Cultural awareness and **sensitivity** involve developing an understanding of another group and knowing that cultural differences exist without assigning values (i.e., better or worse, right or wrong) to those differences.²

Cultural competency in health care "...describes the ability of systems to provide care to patients with diverse values, beliefs and behaviors, including the tailoring of health care delivery to meet patients' social and linguistic needs."³

Cultural Competency's Role in Quality Care

Sometimes, people from different cultures have different perceptions about illness and competent treatment. These beliefs may be based on religious ideas, folklore or their own common-sense explanations.⁴

People's perceptions of health care can influence clinical encounters and their willingness to take medication or have surgery. Those who've had a bad experience with the health system in the past may also feel mistrustful or hesitant. Acknowledging your patients' beliefs, perceptions about illness and self-care practices is an important part of delivering quality, culturally competent care.

Promoting Cultural Competency

Culturally competent health care begins with an awareness of your own cultural beliefs and practices and recognizing that people from other cultures may not share them. Validating and signaling an openness to social and cultural perceptions and expectations that differ from your own helps ensure people get the care they need to prevent, identify and treat health care problems.



Culturally competent health care can help improve positive patient outcomes and in-office efficiency. For providers, this means a greater potential for high quality scores and financial rewards associated with our quality incentive programs.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

² State of Tennessee Department of Finance and Administration Manual

³ Becoming a Culturally Competent Health Care Organization, American Hospital Association/Health Research and Educational Trust

⁴ Quality Care Interactions Training

These factors may play a role in a patient's cultural beliefs and practices:

- › Age
- › Disabilities
- › Education level
- › Ethnicity
- › Gender identity
- › Geographic residence
- › Identification with community groups (religious, professional, community service, political, etc.)
- › Individual experiences
- › Language
- › Length of residency in the U.S.
- › Place of birth
- › Race
- › Sex
- › Sexual orientation
- › Veteran status
- › Income level

Consider these tips to help promote culturally competent care in your practice.

Support health literacy. Ask yourself and others in your practice, "If I spoke a different language or had a language barrier, would I feel comfortable with this treatment/facility/provider?" Then, find ways to help promote health literacy, especially among those who may have limited English proficiency (LEP), such as:

- › Communicating clearly.
- › Slowing down the pace of the conversation.
- › Using plain language to explain information about health conditions and treatments.
- › Helping patients find ways to communicate that will allow you to assess their health needs.
- › Using an interpreter. Providers are required to make an interpreter available to those with LEP at no charge. Note: A person's family members, including their minor children, shouldn't serve as the interpreter during medical visits.
- › Using the teach-back method and asking questions to assess patients' understanding of the information presented.

Adapt service delivery to help meet the diverse needs of patients. Moving towards culturally appropriate service delivery means being:

- › Knowledgeable about cultural differences and their impact on attitudes and behaviors
- › Sensitive, understanding, non-judgmental and respectful in conversations with people whose culture differs from your own
- › Flexible and skillful in responding and adapting to different cultural contexts and circumstances



Ask the Right Questions and Look for Answers

The occurrence of acute and chronic medical conditions can vary among people of different ethnicities and cultures. Your observations and questions can help improve the quality of care and remove barriers in patients' health care.

Make cultural knowledge a key part of your practice's policies and procedures.

Please ensure employees are trained on appropriate communication methods.

Find ways to ask open-ended questions, when possible. Acknowledge the person's perception of illness and self-care practices. Talk with them about how the medical system works and explain that asking many questions about their health and symptoms is often necessary to get an accurate diagnosis.

Schedule more time for appointments with those who have LEP, which may take twice as long. During these visits, talk directly to the patient (not their interpreter).

Consider involving extended family members in care planning. In many cultures, families are deeply involved in individuals' medical decisions. Note: Please use your clinical judgment to determine if this is appropriate. Make sure you have your patient's consent to discuss their health information with others.

Where to Find More Information

To learn more, review the **Non-Discrimination Compliance Information for Providers** cultural competency training at bluecare.bcbst.com/providers. This training includes information about relevant laws and regulations, language assistance planning, filing a discrimination complaint, and useful third-party resources.

Our network providers also have access to free cultural competency training through Quality Interactions. This innovative, online program can help your clinical and non-clinical staff work more effectively with patients or peers with different cultural backgrounds. The Quality Interactions program is accredited for up to 1 hour of CME, CEU or CCM credits and supported by evidence-based medicine and peer-reviewed literature. Visit learn.qualityinteractions.com/bcbstn/bluecare to get started and sign up for an account. Please note, the location of this training has recently changed. If you've previously registered for a Quality Interactions account, you'll need to visit the URL above and change your password before logging in to your account.

Thank you for all you do for our members. By working together to promote this important aspect of care, we can help improve the quality of care and health equity in our state.