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Bridging the gap: The St. Cloud Somali community's view of illness and disease in a Western society & its effects on patient care

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Bridging the Gap: The St. Cloud Somali Community's View of Illness and Disease in a Western Society & its Effects on Patient Care

Introduction

In this ethnographic study, we looked at how the Somali people view illness and disease in a Western society. In addition, we looked at how differing views and cultural practices affected their treatment and interpretation of Western medicine. Due to the ongoing increase of Somali people in the United States, this topic is important in showcasing the difficulties that newcomers face when it comes to medicine and how these experiences shape their view of Western medicine. These difficulties include language barriers and cultural differences. Our main focus was on the St. Cloud area due to its close proximity to the College of Saint Benedict and the fact that Minnesota has the highest percentage of Somali people in the U.S. The study involved interviews from the director of English Learners at Discovery Community Elementary School, doctors at the St. Cloud Hospital emergency department and within the CentraCare clinic system, a Somali community health worker, and Somali college students.

Methods

-The questions below were used to prompt conversation in the interviews we conducted-

Somali Interviewee questions:

- When was your first encounter with western medicine?
- How would you describe your experience with the health care that you have received thus far in the United States?
- In what ways would you like to see medicine become more inclusive of your cultural beliefs?
- If you were to describe the differences between the health care you received in Somalia and that of America, what would be the major differences, and what would be the similarities?
- Does your cultural belief prevent you from receiving 'necessary' care in an Westernized clinic or hospital?
- Have you ever experienced dissatisfaction at potential cultural incompetence of your healthcare provider?
- What are some challenges you face with physically getting to an appointment?
- Family planning, abortion, cesarean section are hot topics in American medical culture. Could you share the Somali view on these issues and any others that come to mind?

Doctor questions:

- What do you see to be some difficulties that Somali people face when they visit the doctors?
- What is the biggest challenge when working with Somali clients?
- How do you try to accommodate to the Somali refugees' unique needs?
- How do you go about treating a patient who may not believe in the treatments you may be prescribing for them?

Through interviewing with the above questions, the film and information were compiled and what we found can be seen above and at right.

College of St. Benedict | St. John's University

Advised by Dr. Jessica O'Reilley

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What we heard: The Interviews

"Things like that [patients refusing treatment due to cultural differences] are the most frustrating to me because they just don't get it. I can't do anything in the world to make your virus better, but some things are an easy fix for American medicine."

-St Cloud ER Doctor #1

"There was 1 time I had to drink the "sugar water" to test for gestational diabetes, and I did not want to do that because I did not feel sick, and I was confused about it because why look for a disease if I was not having symptoms. Anyway, after a long explanation by the doctor and interpreter I ended up doing it. I did not want to do it mainly because it was during the month of Ramadan and I did not want to break my fast."

-Somali Woman

"No one should have to lose their culture, rather everyone needs to understand each other better," she says, "You just have to be real with them and help them in every way."

-Somali Healthcare Worker

"The most difficult thing for me is the communication and cultural differences which make it hard to provide the best possible care for my patients."

-St. Cloud ER Doctor #2

"My biggest barrier is the language, I always have to have an interpreter at my medical visits, whether it's an office or hospital visit. It's difficult because sometimes the medical staff will assume you know things."

-Somali Woman

"Our parents or the older generation has a hesitation when it comes to going to the doctors and talking about certain things. One of the challenges is religious differences and different points of view."

-SJU Student

"I have felt that some nurses sometimes do not understand my background. They look as though they are afraid of me, or intimidated by me. I can't quite put my finger on it, but sometimes you just feel uncomfortable."

-Somali Woman

"I have [a] hard time with preventative medicine as I grew up with the understanding that you only see a doctor if you are sick."

-Somali Woman

"Pork and alcohol ingredients are in certain medicines, but when it comes to certain vitamins, there is a gelatin [from pork]," and, "As a Muslim people, we do not eat pork or anything related to pork because we consider that animal a filthy animal and it goes against our religion."

-SJU Student

Interview Findings

- All members interviewed stated that language barriers were the largest issue faced
- Religion plays a huge factor in Somali people's decisions concerning medical care
- In general, people interviewed were reluctant to be filmed (perhaps indicative of healthcare being a very personal subject for interviewees)
- In general, Somali women felt uncomfortable talking to men about health related issues (Healthcare Worker especially)
- The older generation appears to struggle more with acculturating to Western Medicine while the younger generation does not experience this problem to the same degree (language could be a large factor).

Background and Findings

- While conducting this research, cultural tension was on the rise in the St. Cloud Area between Somali migrants and the local community.¹
- 32,000 Somali migrants are currently living in the St. Cloud and Greater Metro Area (This is the largest concentration in the United States).²
- "Somali students make up about 10 percent of the student population in the St. Cloud Area School District and their numbers have been steadily growing." With over 10,000 students, this means over 1000 Somali students who potentially face language barriers and cultural differences.³

Conclusion & Further Research

We found that there are numerous systems in place to help the Somali community residing in St. Cloud and elsewhere (Lutheran Social Services, CentraCare Health, Catholic Charities, and the Public School District to name a few). However, the presence of a language barrier remains the largest problem faced by both the Somali and local community. Given the limited number of contacts, we remain unable to extrapolate trends based off of subtle evidence gathered. More in-depth interviews would help greatly to better understand the Somali culture and community and its view of Western medicine.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to offer a special thanks to the individuals and doctors for consenting to be interviewed. Names and identifying information has been changed to respect subject confidentiality. Images were originally produced or extensively modified and cited below.

Sources:

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