Mustard patches and boiled garlic: folk remedies & cultural competence
by Elena Morrow, MIS Manager

In my work as a community educator, I often ask my audience for their definition of cultural competence. We live in a world with hundreds of languages, nations, and communities within each nation. It is an impossible task to know every single cultural belief and practice in every single community, be it small or large. Even seasoned medical interpreters, who have seen it all & heard it all, at times are surprised by the remedies patients use and health-related beliefs they hold.

Ask a Ukrainian grandma, wise with age and beliefs they hold. It’s common for societies to develop their own unique healing practices over the course of many hundreds of years. My home country of Ukraine is no exception. While there is a great number of modern medications available in drug stores, other remedies are often readily available, and often worth a try.

Folk medicine is an organic part of Ukraine, a country whose identity has always been bound to its land and vegetation. And even after Christianity took hold in Kiev as early as 988, the ordinary people’s healing traditions stayed on. While you would have to visit some of Ukraine’s most secret, rural places to find people still practicing pagan rituals today, even urban Ukrainians follow many bits of folk medicine.

Here are some examples of folk remedies still practiced today. For auffed nose: chop up some garlic and boil it in a pan, then stand over it and breathe in the fumes. A cold can be treated with honey, lemon and hot tea. Hurting feet can be soothed by immersion in a hot water and mustard solution. A sore throat can be cured by pressing a cloth soaked in warm water and cognac against it. For hiccups: rub mustard, vinegar or something else acidic on your tongue, and try to hold it in your mouth for ten minutes without spitting it out. For chest congestion: prepare a poultice of mustard and onions, place on bare skin, and keep it there overnight. (Interestingly, pharmacies in Ukraine sell mustard patches, which can be activated by hot water & placed on bare skin with the same effect.)

For ulcers: mix a shot of hard liquor with a raw egg and shoot the mixture. For a fever: stand before bedtime in ankle-deep hot water while drinking tea spiked with honey and alcohol. In addition, a shot of hard liquor is considered to be a fine cure for an upset stomach.

Ukrainians simply don’t reach for pills and pharmaceutical remedies as fast as Westerners do. On our trip to Ukraine some years ago, my five year old son complained of an ear ache. Here in the US I would have taken him to the clinic to get some antibiotics, as he was prone to ear infections. In my hometown, however, my friend’s mother (who was a nurse), proceeded to insert a piece of yarn soaked in boric alcohol into his ear several times a day. She explained to me that her goal was to create a heating compress for the inner ear. Amazingly, this remedy worked, and the ear ache went away in a few days. Observing this treatment, I was comforting myself with the thought that my parents used many remedies on me when I was little, such as the cupping technique and the mustard patches, and I survived!

Culturally competent care in Western medicine encompasses healthcare services that are respectful of and responsive to the health beliefs, practices and cultural/linguistic needs of patients. The best advice in the delivery of culturally competent care is to always ask your patient a set of simple questions:
- what does the patient believe is the root of his/her illness?
- how is this illness treated in patient’s culture?
- who is the decision maker in this family or for this patient?

Culture influences our understanding of health, healing & wellness, diseases & their causes, patient behavior, and attitudes toward healthcare providers. When we encounter patients who refuse to drink iced water for the fear of developing a sore throat, we need to understand that most likely they come from a culture, where iced drinks are not commonly used. Sometimes offering a cup of tea or warm water instead of ice chips may become your small bridge to building a successful relationship.
New Interpreter Profile: Tsucheng Vang

Tsucheng is a native of Laos. He lived through tough war times in his native land, and eventually migrated with his family to the United States. He worked as a Forward Air Guide and Radio Operator, and it became his foothold in the world of interpreting. Through this experience, he had an opportunity to interact with a broad range of people and cultures.

Since coming to America, he has always made time to assist newly arrived Hmong and Lao refugees to get acclimated to their new life in America. He interpreted and translated for the community at school sites, employment agencies, in hospitals, clinics, in courts, in law offices, and at the Law Enforcement stations.

One of his greatest accomplishments was that he was able to influence both sides of his family to come to the United States for safety after the Vietnam War. Tsucheng is proud to say that all of his family members reside in America. Another accomplishment was that, since his arrival in the United States, he managed to complete his education with an Associate of Science Degree in Human Services.

Something we may not know about Tsucheng - he has a long Lao name: Vannasing Sisavang Sayaovong. His birth name was written Sing in French, so it could be easily pronounced by both Lao and foreigners. When he was in his senior year in High School, some of his classmates started to think of a Lao name to replace their birth name. They wanted this Lao name to be printed on their Diploma. He then came up with this very long one.

During his free time, Tsucheng enjoys camping, scouting land and hiking in the mountains - sort of a continuation of his military experience.

We asked Tsucheng, how does he feel about joining Medical Interpreting Services Department at UC Davis Medical Center? In his own words, "I would like to express my sincere and deepest appreciation to UC Davis for placing a high value on my language and interpreting skills to benefit their patients’ needs. I have a strong sense of pride in being a part of this department". Welcome on-board, Tsucheng! Zoo siab txais tos!

July - Celebrate National Family Month

National Family Month is celebrated in July. This is a good time to reflect on your family and ways to make it stronger. Strong families share many of the same qualities.

**Build Trust**

Strong families build trusting relations by following through with promises.

**Show Commitment**

Strong families feel like a team. They share traditions like having a family picnic on the Fourth of July or taking walks together after dinner. Family members show commitment to the family by making time for family events and making sacrifices for one another.

**Communicate**

Members of strong families talk to one another about important decisions and daily plans. They discuss feelings, as well as day-to-day activities at school or work. When there are conflicts, strong families take time to cool down before responding. They don’t bottle up their anger or let it get out of hand. They talk about possible solutions to problems and work together to carry out the best solution.

**Grow Through Crises**

All families experience crises. Strong families use these experiences to learn and grow. They know even bad experiences can bring about good changes and help them become closer. They admit problems instead of hiding them. They seek help when needed.

**Spend Time Together**

Strong families spend time together, talking, reading, playing games, taking walks, cooking. Some special times involve closeness, like reading a good-night story and tucking children into bed with a kiss.

**Have Fun as a Family**

Strong families know that having fun is important and make plans to have fun together. They plan family trips or parties. Strong families know that laughter is important and use humor to help reduce stress. Family members laugh with one another, not at one another.

**Show Love and Affection**

No matter what children say or do, they need to know that their parents love them. Strong families show caring in many ways. Family members say to each other, “I love you” or “I’m happy we’re in this family together.” They give hugs and show affection in other small ways. They may call each other nicknames and enjoy remembering family stories.

https://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/supporting/celebrate.cfm