

Culture counts

Gathering information about cultural background in your practice

Why does culture count?

Australia has a rich mix of cultural backgrounds, and our diversity is widely recognised as a national strength. First Nations people make up 4% of Australia's population and over half of the population was either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas.

Whether we are born in Australia or overseas, our cultural background influences the way we understand health. This includes our understanding of preventive care and treatments, how we access healthcare, and how we interact with our healthcare provider.

Culture counts because **First Nations people** and people from **multicultural backgrounds** in Australia can still experience **differences in their access to healthcare and their health outcomes**.

A culturally responsive medical practice collects demographic information from patients with the intention of improving the care being delivered to their patients. This information enables better planning for patient care, can improve safety for patients, and enables services to be appropriately tailored.

This information needs to be requested in a sensitive and respectful manner.

“ **Gathering this information from our patients** enables us to provide better, and more equitable healthcare to our patients. ”

It is becoming easier to gather and record cultural information about our patients using the current medical software. Everyone in the practice needs to understand their role in gathering this information.

RACGP Standards of general practice (including C2.1 and C7.1) encourage the gathering of cultural information to support each patient's rights for respectful care.

Understanding and respecting your patient's cultural background, can help you to better support your patient's **health and wellbeing**.

A person's cultural background includes their traditional practices, religious practices and beliefs, and the language(s) they speak. These are influenced by family and social groups. Each of these things **influence how people receive and respond to information about health, education, parenting and relationships**.

A person's cultural background can be different to their nationality and can be different to the country where they were born.

People may speak the same language, yet come from very different cultural backgrounds.

How you can help?

Your **patient registration forms** can gather important information about your patient's background, such as:

- country of birth
- ethnicity or cultural background*
- if an interpreter is required
- preferred language
- date of arrival in Australia (if born overseas)
- religion.

Patients can decline to provide this information if they wish. Some people have valid concerns about sharing this information, so it is **recommended to include a 'prefer not to say' option**. If so, further information may be provided at a later time, even during a clinical consultation.

Display this poster within your practice.



Cultural information can help practices to better tailor information to their patients' care needs.

Patients from various cultural backgrounds may be eligible for particular vaccines, services or programs.

Understanding the cultural diversity within a practice can help the staff members of the practice to communicate more effectively and understand their patients' health concerns.

The practice can include the cultural information in their clinical audits to support their clinicians to provide culturally appropriate care. This can help identify gaps in care that the practice could address.

Always keep patient information private

It is important to ensure that patients understand that all the information collected by your practice will be kept private and is subject to privacy laws that ensure the information is protected and used appropriately.

Remember to continue to **update this information** in your practice systems over time.

Communication

Communication across cultural and language barriers is an essential skill for people working in general practice.

All patients have a right to understand the information and recommendations that they receive from their practitioners. A culturally responsive practice will enable all patients to exercise their rights.

Always **engage a qualified interpreter** if your patient does not speak English or if you do not speak their language fluently.

Encourage your patients to ask for an interpreter when attending other health services such as a pharmacy, radiology, allied health or specialists.

Glossary

***Cultural background:** describes a person's self-identified background and may incorporate their customs, traditions, beliefs, values, behaviours, and rules for their community.

***Ethnicity:** the shared identity or similarity of a group of people on the basis of one or more factors such as a cultural tradition, a common geographic region, a common language.

These terms are often used interchangeably. The patient can self-identify with the culture or ethnicity that they most associate with. Examples include: Australian, English, Chinese, Samoan, Indian, Italian etc.

Sample question: *What cultural background or ethnicity do you identify with?*

Reproduced with permission from
Brisbane South PHN 2024