WITH THE increasing Muslim population in Ireland, healthcare providers need to have an understanding of the beliefs and religious preferences of their Muslim patients to provide optimal care for them.

Islam is a universal religion comprising all nationalities with 1.5 billion followers. There are about 15 million Muslims living in Europe. Throughout the world Muslims are connected by their common faith and heritage. Islam dictates a comprehensive way of life that cannot be separated from patients. However, there are some non-practising Muslims who for their own reasons, commit non-permitted acts, e.g. homosexuality or suicide. Such individual actions, even if they are against religious teachings, must not affect the quality of care given to a patient or their relatives.

Muslims in Ireland
The recorded Islamic presence in Ireland goes back to 1950s. According to Irish censuses, the Muslim population was 3,873 in 1991, rising to 19,147 in 2002 and was projected to be 25,000-30,000 in 2005. The majority of Muslims in Ireland are students and health workers; with the remainder being mainly businessmen, teachers, IT professionals, housewives, children and asylum seekers.

Basic information about Islam
Islam is one of the three major monotheistic religions. Islam means total submission to the will of God. It is a religion of peace, mercy and forgiveness, and its teachings have nothing to do with the extremely grave events which have come to be associated with faith. Allah is the Muslim name of God. Quran is the Muslim Holy Book which was revealed in Arabic, and has remained unchanged since its revelation 14 centuries ago. Mosque is a Muslim place of worship. Islam consists of seven articles of faith and five fundamental pillars.

The articles of faith are belief in:
- God
- Angels of God
- Prophets of God (from Adam to Jesus and then Muhammad, peace be upon them all)
- Books of God (eg. Psalms of David, Torah, Bible and Quran)
- The Hereafter
- The Day of Judgement
- Fate.

The fundamental pillars are:
- Belief in one God and Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) as the last messenger of God
- Five daily prayers
- Fasting during the month of Ramadan
- Zakaat (a compulsory annual charity)
- Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

Islamic view of illness
Muslims consider illness as atonement for their sins and not as punishment from God. However, they are strongly encouraged to seek care and treatment. During illness Muslims are expected to seek God’s help with patience and prayers, increase the remembrance of God, ask for forgiveness, give more in charity, and read and listen to Quran.

Islamic health practices
Islam prohibits matters that are hazardous to health (eg. disbelief, alcohol, excessive eating, eating meat of dead animals, blood and all intoxicants, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality) and dictates health promoting practices (eg. prayers and meditation, fasting, ablation and bathing, and breastfeeding). Cleanliness is considered ‘half of the faith’.

The principles of Islamic ethics include preservation of patients’ faith, sanctity of life, alleviation of suffering, respect for patients’ autonomy, and always being honest and truthful in giving information.

Hygiene:
Washing facilities should be made available in toilets, e.g. a simple plastic container, for individuals to wash their private parts.

For bedridden patients, special care should be taken with urine, stools, discharges and blood. These patients may pray in bed and therefore the bed has to be clean. A container of water should be made available to them whenever they use a bed pan and at meal times.

Religious service
A relationship exists between patients’ religious/spiritual lives and their experiences of illness and disease. If possible, a prayer room should be made available. The direction of Mecca, i.e. roughly south-east in Ireland should be pointed out to patients as all Muslims face towards Mecca for prayer.

Food service
Only Halal meat (ie. meat prepared by Islamic method) should be given to Muslim patients. Utensils used for non-Halal meat must not be used for Muslim food
### Approved and forbidden foods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approved foods (halal)</th>
<th>Forbidden foods (haram)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Meat and substitutes</td>
<td>- Pork and all pig products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Chicken, beef, lamb (killed by Islamic method), all seafood, eggs, beans and lentils</td>
<td>- Meat of any animal not killed by Islamic method</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Milk, milk products, fats and oils</td>
<td>- Lard, dripping, suet, animal fats (except butter) and any foods made with or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Milk, yogurt, cheese, butter, vegetable margarine, vegetables oils</td>
<td>- cooked in them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fruit and vegetables</td>
<td>- Anything cooked in animal fat.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- All</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Bread and cereals</td>
<td>- Alcohol, foods cooked with alcohol, cordials.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- All breakfast cereals, bread, rice, pasta, cakes and biscuits without animal fat</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Beverages and soups</td>
<td>- Any with or cooked in alcohol or animal fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tea, coffee, fruit juices, soft drinks, mineral and soda water</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Desserts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Any without alcohol and animal fat (except butter)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

without washing. Foods permitted and forbidden by Islamic law are summarised in the Table.

### Care of the deceased

It is preferable that female patients are cared for by females and male patients by males, particularly during confinement. Medicines containing alcohol or other animal derivatives should not be used. These rules do not apply in emergency situations or with deficient resources.

A fasting person will not be able to take any mid-day dose. Alternative dosing regimens should be considered. However, Islam allows a sick person not to fast.

Muslims generally wear clothing that does not reveal the shape of their bodies. Hospitals should provide appropriate clothing or advise patients to bring their own. Medical examination techniques should be modified to minimise patient exposure.

Beard is considered an important religious symbol in Islam. Permission must be obtained to shave any part of the beard.

A sick Muslim may perform prayers in bed. Healthcare providers must not disturb the patient during prayer. On Fridays, a holy day for Muslims, patients may receive more visitors than on other days.

### For a terminally ill patient

A survey conducted by George H Gallup International Institute in 1997 showed that people overwhelmingly want their spiritual needs addressed when they are close to death.

It is very important to remind a dying Muslim to recite the testimony of faith: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad (Pbuh) is the messenger of God.” Recitation of Quran and prayers close to the patient is recommended. The relatives should be facilitated to perform these sacraments.

### For a patient who has just died

The eyes of the deceased should be gently closed and the whole body must be covered by a clean sheet.

Muslims believe that the body ‘feels’ pain and pressure, and therefore must be handled minimally with utmost respect and only by the person of the same sex if possible. Post-mortems are prohibited in Islam unless absolutely necessary. Islam recommends burial as soon as possible after death.

### Maternity service

The modesty of a woman must be respected. The husband may be present during childbirth. After delivery, the placenta should be offered to the parents for burial according to Islamic tradition. A miscarriage or an intrauterine death after 120 days of conception requires burial. The foetus is given a name before burial.

### Newborn

A call for prayer is recited in each ear of the newborn. Circumcision is performed on all male children. Removing the scalp hair of the new-born is practised by many Muslims.

### Abortion

Abortion is not permitted in Islam unless medically indicated. Termination of pregnancy after four months of gestation is regarded as murder unless the pregnancy poses a serious threat to the mother’s life.

### Birth control and facilitation

Although the use of reversible contraception by pre-coital methods, eg. birth control pills, diaphragms, spermicides and condoms is not forbidden in Islam, they are regarded as undesirable. The use of these methods must have medical reasons and must not cause harm to the user.

Many Muslim authorities prohibit the use of post-coital methods of contraception such as the morning-after pill or the intrauterine device because these could result in the abortion of a fertilised egg.

The rhythm method and coitus interruptus are acceptable forms of contraception provided they are performed with the consent of the wife. Islam does not permit irreversible methods of contraception, eg. tubal ligation and vasectomy. In-vitro fertilisation and artificial insemination are permitted provided that only the husband’s sperm is used.

### Euthanasia and suicide

According to Islamic law, God is the creator and owner of human life and therefore a person has no right to terminate it. One has to preserve life in health or sickness and ask God for support.

Euthanasia is regarded as murder for the person who is performing it and suicide for the person ending his/her life. Suicide is forbidden in Islam under any circumstances.

### Awareness of beliefs

A relationship between Muslim patients’ belief and illness must not be forgotten. Care of a Muslim patient is not complete without caring for their spiritual needs.

Health professionals should be sensibly aware of Muslims’ beliefs. Implementing sensitive and appropriate healthcare, including physical as well as religious/spiritual, will ensure improved outcome.

Muslim scholars, doctors, solicitors, teachers, social workers and so on are available if problems arise. In addition, the Islamic Centre of Ireland can be contacted.

### References on request

Dr Abdul Mughees is a consultant anaesthetist at Cavan General Hospital.


References on request