

# TRANSCULTURAL PERINATAL CARE

# Position Paper

**ISSUE:**

Language and cultural barriers interfere with the provision of health care throughout this country and result in tragic costs in terms of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality as well as wasted health care dollars. Cultural proficiency is a tool to reduce health outcome disparities across cultural and ethnic lines and should be considered an important foundational component of each relationship within our health care delivery system.

**BACKGROUND:**

Culture is defined as an integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas and products. It is a philosophy of life and death that is passed from generation to generation and is dynamically changing within itself and as practiced by its members. It includes a deeply engrained belief system that may contradict the recommendations of traditional medical practice, and create barriers to effective partnerships between providers, patients and their families.

Understanding one's own culture and values is an essential part of becoming culturally proficient. Additionally, recognizing that Western values permeate the U.S. health care system needs to be understood if one is to offer culturally appropriate care for other cultures. Traditional American health care values include the sacredness of life, autonomous decision making and prevention of suffering. Other cultures have alternative value systems that may conflict with these western traditions. For example, significant conflict and confusion may occur if a patient is not considered the primary decision maker in her own culture, yet is expected to make decisions in the health care setting.

Spoken language is an important component of effective communication and appropriate interpretive services are necessary for the non-English speaking patient. However speaking the same language does not ensure successful communication. Furthermore, nonverbal communication often speaks louder than words. Therefore culturally acceptable forms of eye contact, body closeness, and touching are important nonverbal aspects of effective and respectful cross-cultural communication.

Cultural proficiency goes far beyond the elimination of verbal, and nonverbal, language barriers however. It demands respect for belief systems different from one's own. It requires ongoing education in the ways ethnicity, culture, and heritage impact health care delivery. Perhaps most importantly, it depends upon strong personal initiative and an untiring willingness to reach out to someone different from oneself and cross the cultural gap.

**STRATEGY:**

NPA believes that cultural proficiency is important for each member of the health care team and supports efforts to promote cultural awareness, educate health care professionals, and reduce culturally related health outcome disparities.

February 21, 2004