

# Cultural Competency in Health Care



Culture shapes how people experience their world. It's a vital component of how health care services are delivered and received.

Culturally competent health care goes beyond speaking another language or recognizing people's cultural history. It's rooted in mutual respect and means being open to learning more about patients and their cultures, and acknowledging potential biases we may have. By delivering culturally competent health care, providers promote health equity and reduce health disparities.

BlueCross network providers agree not to discriminate in the quality of services and treatment provided to patients of all cultural backgrounds. They also agree to be willing and able to treat all patients.

In this guide, we share more about what it means to deliver culturally competent care and resources you may find useful. We hope you find the information helpful.

## Important Definitions

**Health equity** is achieved when every person has the opportunity to achieve their full health potential, regardless of social position or other socially determined circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Some factors that may limit a person's access to health care and good health practices are:

- › Racial and ethnic discrimination
- › Lack of access to quality education
- › Income and wealth gaps
- › Inadequate housing or lack of housing
- › Unsafe environments

**Culture is the** “... sum total of values, beliefs, standards, languages, thinking patterns, behavioral norms, communication styles, etc. of a group of people, institutions or organizations that guides decisions and actions and is transmitted from one generation to another.”<sup>2</sup>

**Cultural awareness and sensitivity** involve developing an understanding of another group and knowing that cultural differences exist without assigning values (i.e., better or worse, right or wrong) to those differences.<sup>2</sup>

**Cultural competency in health care** “...describes the ability of systems to provide care to patients with diverse values, beliefs and behaviors, including the tailoring of health care delivery to meet patients’ social and linguistic needs.”<sup>3</sup>

## Cultural Competency’s Role in Quality Care

Sometimes, people from different cultures have different perceptions about illness and competent treatment. These beliefs may be based on religious ideas, folklore or their own common-sense explanations.<sup>4</sup>

People’s perceptions of health care can influence clinical encounters and their willingness to take medication or have surgery. Those who’ve had a bad experience with the health system in the past may also feel mistrustful or hesitant. Acknowledging your patients’ beliefs, perceptions about illness and self-care practices is an important part of delivering quality, culturally competent care.

## Promoting Cultural Competency

Culturally competent health care begins with an awareness of your own cultural beliefs and practices and recognizing that people from other cultures may not share them. Validating and signaling an openness to social and cultural perceptions and expectations that differ from your own helps ensure people get the care they need to prevent, identify and treat health care problems.

These factors may play a role in a patient’s cultural beliefs and practices:

- |  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| › Education level  | › Place of birth     |
| › Income level   | › Language           |
| › Geographic residence   | › Age                |
| › Identification with community groups (religious, professional, community service, political, etc.) | › Race               |
|  | › Ethnicity          |
|  | › Sex                |
|  | › Sexual orientation |
| › Individual experiences   | › Gender identity    |
| › Length of residency in the U.S.  | › Disabilities       |
|  | › Veteran status     |



Culturally competent health care can help improve positive patient outcomes and in-office efficiency. For providers, this means a greater potential for high quality scores and financial rewards associated with our quality incentive programs.

### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<sup>2</sup> State of Tennessee Department of Finance and Administration Manual

<sup>3</sup> Becoming a Culturally Competent Health Care Organization, American Hospital Association/Health Research and Educational Trust

<sup>4</sup> Quality Care Interactions Training

Consider these tips to help promote culturally competent care in your practice.

**Support health literacy.** Ask yourself and others in your practice, “If I spoke a different language, would I feel comfortable with this treatment/facility/provider?” Then, find ways to help promote health literacy, especially among those who may have limited English proficiency (LEP), such as:

- › Communicating clearly.
- › Slowing down the pace of the conversation.
- › Using plain language to explain information about health conditions and treatments.
- › Helping patients find ways to communicate that will allow you to assess their health needs.
- › Using an interpreter. Providers are required to make an interpreter available to those with LEP at no charge. **Note:** A person’s family members, including their minor children, shouldn’t serve as the interpreter during medical visits.

**Adapt service delivery to help meet the diverse needs of patients.** Moving towards culturally appropriate service delivery means being:

- › Knowledgeable about cultural differences and their impact on attitudes and behaviors
- › Flexible and skillful in responding and adapting to different cultural contexts and circumstances
- › Sensitive, understanding, non-judgmental and respectful in conversations with people whose culture differs from your own

**Make cultural knowledge a key part of your practice’s policies and procedures.** Ask bilingual and multicultural staff members or volunteers to help answer patients’ questions and concerns.

**Find ways to ask open-ended questions, when possible.** Acknowledge the person’s perception of illness and self-care practices. Talk with them about how the medical system works and explain that asking many questions about their health and symptoms is often necessary to get an accurate diagnosis.







**Consider using the teach-back method, which involves asking people to repeat information you've shared in their own words.** This can help you gauge their understanding of the discussion.

**Schedule more time for appointments with those who have LEP, which may take twice as long.** During these visits, talk directly to the patient (not their interpreter).

**Consider involving extended family members in care planning.** In many cultures, families are deeply involved in individuals' medical decisions. **Note:** Please use your clinical judgment to determine if this is appropriate. Make sure you have your patient's consent to discuss their health information with others.



### Ask the Right Questions and Look for Answers

The occurrence of acute and chronic medical conditions can vary among people of different ethnicities and cultures. Your observations and questions can help improve the quality of care and remove barriers in patients' health care.

# Where to Find More Information

## Quality Care Interactions

Because we realize that the best care outcomes occur when providers and patients have developed trust, mutual respect and effective communication skills, we're excited to offer our network providers free cultural competency training.

The innovative, online Quality Interactions, Cultural Competency training program, provided by BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, can help you work more effectively with patients or peers with different cultural backgrounds.

This training uses a case-based format, and it's supported by evidence-based medicine and peer-reviewed literature. It also features pre- and post-test evaluations so you can clearly assess the effectiveness of the program. Because this program is accredited, you're eligible for 1 hour of CME, CEU or CCM credits upon completion. Additionally, we'll award you a Cultural Competency designation in our online provider directory.

If you're interested in earning this designation and continuing education through this course, please contact a member of your Commercial Quality Improvement Team to get started.

Thank you for all you do for our members. By working together to promote this important aspect of care, we can help improve the quality of care and health equity in our state.



## Other Online Resources

In addition to the Quality Interactions training offered at no cost to you through BlueCross, we've listed some other resources below for your reference:

- › U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – Think Cultural Health, [thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/education](https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/education)
- › U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – A Physician's Practical Guide to Culturally Competent Care, [thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/](https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/)

## Your Commercial Quality Improvement Team

### **Patty Howard, RN, BSN, CPHQ, FAHM**

Manager, Quality Improvement  
Office: (423) 535-7865  
Patty\_Howard@BCBST.com

### **Shannon Dunn, MHA, BS, LPN, CPHQ, CHC**

Clinical Consultant, Quality Improvement  
Mobile: (423) 298-3951  
Shannon\_Dunn@BCBST.com

### **Lisa Eaves, RN, BS, CPHQ, PAHM**

Cinical Consultant, Quality Improvement  
Mobile: (423) 326-4859  
Lisa\_Eaves@BCBST.com

### **Jennifer Rollins, RN, MSN, CCM, CPHQ, PAHM**

Clinical Consultant, Quality Improvement  
Mobile: (423) 240-0327  
Jennifer\_Rollins@BCBST.com

### **Leigh Sanders, RN, CCM, CPHQ, PAHM**

Clinical Consultant, Quality Improvement  
Mobile: (423) 702-1505  
Leigh\_Sanders@BCBST.com

### **Jessica Castano, RN, BSN, CPHQ**

Supervisor, Quality Improvement  
Office: (423) 535-6655  
Jessica\_Castano@BCBST.com