Hindu Insights on 25 Sensitive Areas Frequently Encountered by Physicians

Hindu medicine, known as ayurveda, the “science of life,” has a highly developed system of practical ethics derived from the Hindu principles of non-hurtfulness, the sanctity of all life, the existence of the soul separate from the body and a willingness to accept life’s circumstances as defined by one’s karma and dharma. In 1999, Hinduism Today was approached by the Texas Medical Association to help them revise and expand a booklet on medical issues called Faith of Our Patients. When it was first published in 1978, the booklet dealt with the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish views of 14 “problem areas” most frequently encountered by physicians, including abortion, artificial insemination, prolongation of life and organ transplants. They had recently expanded their list and sought to include the views of Hinduism and Buddhism to accommodate increased religious diversity among their patients.

To respond to their request, we enlisted the help of Swami Bua, Swami Satchidananda, Swami Ranganathananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Chidanand Sarawati (Manji), Swami Omkarananda, Swami Prayagnanand, Swami Tejomayananda of Chimmaya Mission, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami and his successor, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami. We also consulted with Dr. Virendra Sodhi, an ayurvedic and allopathic doctor in Washington, and Cromwell Crawford of the University of Hawaii, an Indian-born specialist in Hindu medical ethics. The assembled responses below represent the broad consensus of this group, with occasional differing opinions. It remains a work in progress, to be updated as required.

Hospitalization: A doctor administers care to an infirm woman in her final years, when pain control, prolongation of life, organ transplants and the right to die become real, pressing issues.

End-of-Life Issues

Hindus regard death as a most exalted human experience, the migration of the soul from one dimension of consciousness to another, a transition we have all experienced many times. Death is not to be feared, neither unnecessarily accelerated nor reluctantly delayed. In considering the following end-of-life issues the Hindu seeks to preserve the natural timing of death, while humanely comforting and being present for the patient in a spiritual environment.

Preparation for Death

“With our strong conviction that all our actions in the present life will be the cause for the effects in our future life,” says Swami Bua, “we prepared all Hindus for the future so that when they depart, they reach Nirvana and then 정치적으로 external agents through infection or injury. Rather, the development of any disease is also an expression of the soul’s inherent nature and the beyond. in a 24-hour-a-day vigil.” Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami wrote, “Blessed with the knowledge of impending transition, we settle affairs and take refuge in japa, worship, scripture and yoga—seeking the highest realizations as we consciously, joyously release the world. Our soul never dies, only the physical body dies. We simply step out of the physical body and are in our astral body, going on in the mind as usual. For Hindus, death is simply referred to as mahayanaathma, the great journey. The awareness, will, memory and intelligence which we think of as ourselves continue to exist in the soul body. We approach death as a sasathma, as a spiritual opportunity. To leave the body in the right frame of mind, in the right consciousness, through the highest possible chakra, is a key to spiritual progress.”

Pain Control

Hindus regard pain management as an important duty of caretakers. “If an individual opts to undergo the pains, he or she should be looked after.” Swami Bua noted. “Otherwise, it is the duty of the people around to help reduce his suffering. If a person is relieved of pain, his thoughts become sublime with gratitude and the feelings of amity, affection and love. Nobody should be allowed to die with the feelings of bitterness, feelings of wanting or feelings of unfulfilled duties. We should do everything possible to keep the dying person comfortable till his end, which is determined by Him.” Opiates and other drugs have been used for this purpose in Hindu medicine for thousands of years, according to Dr. Sodhi. However, he explains, “They try not to administer so much pain-killer as to alter or lose consciousness.” Excessive pain-killers can dull awareness and inhibit the conscious transition that is the Hindu ideal.

Prolongation of Life

Ayurveda classifies disease as either sadhya, those that can be effectively treated and cured, or asadhya, those that cannot. It further classifies untreatable diseases as those which can be managed for an acceptable quality of life, such as diabetes, and those which cannot, such as terminal cancer. If treatment cannot provide the patient a quality life, then it is considered better to give no treatment beyond palliative measures.

The “Right to Die”

It is the law in many parts of America that a hospital must do everything possible to keep a patient alive as long as possible, no matter what his or her state of consciousness, or the prognosis for a useful existence. If the patient’s financial resources are exhausted, then the hospital will simply stop providing care. Hindus accept the natural timing of life and of death and do not strain to gain a few months of struggle-filled life at great effort and expense.

“Do-Not-Resuscitate” Orders

Part of a living will deals with “Do-not-resuscitate” orders. These instructions are effective when they are clear and explicit, or unless the patient is in a 24/7 hospital setting. Hospice care, for example, can preserve the resources of a family, avoiding costly and ineffective heroic treatment. Hindus accept the natural timing of life and of death and do not strain to gain a few months of struggle-filled life at great effort and expense.
a. manivel

A critical and closely related issue any living will should address is the removal of life support. Modern medicine can keep patients alive when they are unable to breathe or take nourishment, and when organs cease to function, including the heart. Life-support machines are the guards that sustain life. The guards are the life-support machines and the point that the natural will of the person has sustained is to keep a traveler board a plane flight he has a reservation for, to keep a2a.

When the physical body dies, this automatically severs the silver cord that connects the astral and physical bodies," Gurudeva explained in Merging with Siva. Metaphysically, this is the point of death. Physically, death can be defined as the cessation of breath, heartbeat and brainwave activity, in that order. Even then, it may be possible to revive a person, and the patient may report a "near-death experience" of beginning the transition to the next world but being pulled back. Decay of the body is the definitive sign of death.

Autopsies

Autopsies are the examination of a dead body to learn the cause of death. Hindus believe that autopsies are disturbing to the still aware soul which has just separated from the body and should therefore be avoided unless required by law. Similarly, embalming, which replaces the blood with a preservative fluid, is ill-advised to systematically, nobly and acceptably, even to loved ones, release itself from embodiment through fasting. The person making such a decision declares it publicly, which allows for community regulation and distinguishes the act from suicide committed privately in traumatic emotional states of anguish and despair. Ancient law-givers cited various stipulations for prayopavesha: inability to perform normal bodily purification, death appears imminent, or the condition is so bad that life's pleasures are nil. The gradual nature of prayopavesha is the key factor in distinguishing it from sudden suicide. For it allows time for the individual to settle all differences with others; to ponder life and draw close to God. It also gives the person time to reflect and reconsider his decision.

Definition of Death

"When the physical body dies, this automatically severs the silver cord that connects the astral and physical bodies," Gurudeva explained in Merging with Siva. Metaphysically, this is the point of death. Physically, death can be defined as the cessation of breath, heartbeat and brainwave activity, in that order. Even then, it may be possible to revive a person, and the patient may report a "near-death experience" of beginning the transition to the next world but being pulled back. Decay of the body is the definitive sign of death.

Autopsies

Autopsies are the examination of a dead body to learn the cause of death. Hindus believe that autopsies are disturbing to the still aware soul which has just separated from the body and should therefore be avoided unless required by law. Similarly, embalming, which replaces the blood with a preservative fluid, is ill-advised to systematically, nobly and acceptably, even to loved ones, release itself from embodiment through fasting. The person making such a decision declares it publicly, which allows for community regulation and distinguishes the act from suicide committed privately in traumatic emotional states of anguish and despair. Ancient law-givers cited various stipulations for prayopavesha: inability to perform normal bodily purification, death appears imminent, or the condition is so bad that life's pleasures are nil. The gradual nature of prayopavesha is the key factor in distinguishing it from sudden suicide. For it allows time for the individual to settle all differences with others; to ponder life and draw close to God. It also gives the person time to reflect and reconsider his decision.

Definition of Death

"When the physical body dies, this automatically severs the silver cord that connects the astral and physical bodies," Gurudeva explained in Merging with Siva. Metaphysically, this is the point of death. Physically, death can be defined as the cessation of breath, heartbeat and brainwave activity, in that order. Even then, it may be possible to revive a person, and the patient may report a "near-death experience" of beginning the transition to the next world but being pulled back. Decay of the body is the definitive sign of death.

Autopsies

Autopsies are the examination of a dead body to learn the cause of death. Hindus believe that autopsies are disturbing to the still aware soul which has just separated from the body and should therefore be avoided unless required by law. Similarly, embalming, which replaces the blood with a preservative fluid, is ill-advised
The offspring of such a union is blessed and protected by the holy man –

**Matters of Birth**

Hindus consider children a gift from God, and the conception, development and birth of a child are sacred events, honored by a ceremony, or samskara, marking these rites of passage. Today’s medical technology has developed many means for conceiving children (and for their disposal before birth). Hindus have a general unwillingness to interfere with nature and a special aversion to abortion, based on the belief in reincarnation and the sanctity of marriage.

**Conception**

From the Hindu point of view, conception connects a soul from the next world to this world, and the state of mind at the moment of conception—including the purity and spiritual intent of both partners—is a major factor in determining who is born into the family. Prospective parents often offer prayers at the temples, perform spiritual disciplines and visit saints for their advice and blessings in their effort to conceive a worthy child. In Western thinking, no emphasis is placed on the state of mind of the parents at conception, and there is little understanding of the ways parents can affect the “quality” of the souls born to them.

**Birth Control**

While revering conception as a divine act, Hindus have little hesitation to practice birth control, and there are remedies specified in ayurvedic both for facilitating and preventing conception. Yes, as Swami Bua reminds us, restraint and moderation are important. “Hindu scriptures explain how to beget a child. They specify the days, time and methods. That means they would have known also how not to beget a child! But willful control of conception by oneself or mediation is advocated. The preferred control was through restraint, as wasting of life seeds was considered unhealthy and unethical. Birth control now is highlighted as a prime duty of every citizen to the society and nation. But one must realize that these open discussions are licensing the society towards promiscuity, since the weak minds take the shortest route to pleasures, however fleeting they may be, uninformful of consequences.”

**Sterility Testing**

While ostensibly harmless, sterility tests can cause serious social and emotional difficulty if one is deemed sterile, including inability to find a spouse, cancellation of proposals and the ruin of marriages once it is known “who is to blame” for the lack of children. “This should not be resorted to as a routine test,” says Swami Bua. “Doubting the manliness of a man and femininity of a woman is degrading them. What will happen to those who fail the test? Will anybody come forward to marry them? Even though procreation is the main aim of a marriage, it is not the only aim. After a reasonable time following the marriage, if there has been no conception, and if a mature couple desire to get tested with a view to take corrective action, it may be done.” Dr. Sodhi points out that, while ayurveda has no tests for sterility, the likelihood of children has developed many means for conceiving children (and for their disposal before birth). Hindus have a general unwillingness to interfere with nature and a special aversion to abortion, based on the belief in reincarnation and the sanctity of marriage.

**Artificial Insemination**

Fertilization of the egg by mechanical introduction of sperm is universally acceptable when the sperm is provided by the woman’s husband. But questions arise with donated sperm from another man. Because conception creates a psychic bond between a man and a woman, even if they don’t meet physically, fertilization in this manner may have a similar karma as adultery. “In Sanatana Dharma initiation into married life is sanctified by sacred sacramental rites,” says Swami Tejomayananda. “The offspring of such a union is blessed and protected by the holy mantras and rites. If there is some defect or obstruction in either partner, artificial insemination may be resorted to, but with the husband’s sperm only. If the procedure succeeds, it may be taken as the will of the Lord for that couple. Use of seeds from the sperm banks or from any living person other than the husband is not proper. It will amount to bearing child outside holy wedlock.” However, as Professor Crawford points out: the Manus Dharma Shastru did allow a woman to conceive a child by another man, usually her husband’s brother. Swami Bua mentions this tradition also. “The Rig Veda and Atharva Veda prescribe the procedure called nyapuj to enable a childless widow or the wife of an impotent man to raise progeny with his consent. But even with that, the attitude of an average Hindu woman considers the one who has given her a child as her respectful husband.” Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami points out that, while Hindus consider conception a divine act, they would not be the child’s true father, resulting in a weak relationship with the child and even with the wife who bore it and another to conceive the child.

**In Vitro Fertilization**

Even with present-day technology, the creation of “test-tube babies,” the fertilization of the egg outside the womb and its subsequent placement in the womb, is expensive and unreproducible. As with artificial insemination, it is acceptable if the egg and sperm are from the husband and wife. Like other medical advances, in vitro fertilization introduces unknown factors that may bring unintended consequences, not necessarily positive or conducive to spiritual progress, which is life’s real purpose. Hindus regard the natural way of things as endowed with God’s infinite intelligence and often ask, “Are humans wise enough to tinker with the cosmic order of life?”

**Abortion**

Hindu scripture and tradition clearly prohibit abortion, except to save the life of the mother. It is considered an act against (universal order) and ahimsa (noninjury). In the words of Swami Omkar-ananda, “Imagine, through millions of abortions around the world, day in and day out, how many wonderful scientific and spiritual geniuses—doctors, men of excellence of every kind, sages, saints, benefited mankind, builders of a better culture and civilization—are destroyed even before they can take a breath of fresh air here on Earth! Hindu ethics also do not justify aborting a fetus because of actual or potential deformity or mental retardation, for each birth, normal or not, is revered as having a divine purpose to be understood, not manipulated. Nevertheless, abortion is performed today by Hindu women in India and elsewhere—in particular, the selective termination of female fetuses following ultrasound examination. Professor Crawford calls that practice “a perverted use of modern science, a scar from the unrelieved form of female infanticide.”

Crawford summarizes in sutra 34 of Living with Siva, “Followers know abortion is, by Vedic injunction, a sinfull act against dharma fraught with karmic repercussion. Abortion only allows it to prevent the mother’s death, for it is a greater sin for a child to kill the mother.” “In the modern context,” says Swami Tejomayananda, “attention must be focused on the prevention of pregnancy by educating and creating awareness in the parents.” Abortion, should it occur, creates a karma to be faced in the future, but is not regarded as an unforgivable “sin.” A penance could mitigate the karma, such as adopting a baby who might otherwise have been aborted if no home was provided.

**Selective Termination of Multiple Fetuses**

Fetuses are rare, except when a couple is undergoing fertility treatments. These often result in multiple fetuses, creating a potentially dangerous condition for the mother. Under the principle that life is sacred, the parents cannot be allowed to save the mother’s life. Dr. Sodhi believes that selective abortion is acceptable when a specific pregnancy poses such a threat. It is an unfortunate choice to have to make, and it is hoped that future technology will reliably produce only one fetus.
Pain-Relief Drugs for Newborns

Pain relief for children should be carefully chosen to not form, or lay the seeds for, a future addiction. Dr. Sodhi, “the baby has an sensitive a nervous system as an adult, just not as developed. So pain medicine is okay, if necessary. Morphine was used for thousands of years in the form of opium, applied on the baby's skin for pain relief.”

Circumcision

Hindus consider the practice of circumcision for males unnecessary and do not practice it. Doctors should be alerted to Hindu views on this often-standard procedure. A circumcised Hindu boy could face ridicule and discrimination. In rare occasions, the procedure is required as a medical necessity for an adult, but is kept secret.

Organ Transplants

Hindus believe that the recipient of a major organ, such as heart, liver or kidney, takes on some of the karmas of the donor. Evidence of this transfer of karma can be found in documented cases where the organ recipients took on the interests, emotions, food preferences, etc. of the donor, especially after a heart transplant. Transplants apparently create psychic connections with the donor, whether living or dead. Also, the fact that part of a deceased donor’s physical body still “lives” may interfere with his reincarnation pattern, keeping him close to the physical plane and to the recipient. Swami Tejomayananda offers, “The Hindu view of life is to accept the inevitable, to go through the karma, exhaust it and be free to take on new life to evolve further spiritually.” Swami Bua is supportive. “Let us encourage and support the scientists and medical men who are working with pure intentions towards a painless, diseaseless society. We should only guard against unscrupulous traders in human organs.”

Religious or Faith Healings

Hindus make use of all means of healing, be they medical, astrological or metaphysical. The last includes mantras and yoga, seeking the guidance of a guru or performing temple ceremonies for the direct blessing and intervention of God, Gods and devas. “A Hindu has an ardent faith in the powers of prayers and in the Supreme God,” says Swami Bua, “The patient will go to the doctor—ayurvedic or allopathic—all the while praying to God for his heal; surgeons operate on a patient; blood transfusions are administered cases where the organ recipients took on the interests, emotions, food preferences, etc., of the donor, especially after a heart transplant. Transplants apparently create psychic connections with the donor, whether living or dead. Also, the fact that part of a deceased donor’s physical body still ‘lives’ may interfere with his reincarnation pattern, keeping him close to the physical plane and to the recipient. Swami Tejomayananda offers, ‘The Hindu way of life is to accept the inevitable, to go through the karma, exhaust it and be free to take on new life to evolve further spiritually.’ Swami Bua is supportive. ‘Let us encourage and support the scientists and medical men who are working with pure intentions towards a painless, diseaseless society. We should only guard against unscrupulous traders in human organs.’ Swami Chidanand Saraswat (Muni) feels that it is ‘important to donate organs’ in the Hindu spirit of giving and sacrifice. Dr. Sodhi offers, ‘Some transplants, such as the cornea, are okay, but not the heart, which is the seat of the soul according to ayurveda. If the quality of life is going to be very good after the transplant, I might not have a problem, but if they have to be on harsh drugs all the time, maybe transplanting is not the best idea.’ Swami Satchidananda says, ‘What are we doing by transplanting organs? By replacing organs in a body which is clearly dying, we are not allowing the soul to fulfill its karma in this life by dying at the proper time and getting a new body. The trend of science seems to want to keep the soul indefinitely in the same old body with repaired parts. This is not the correct thing to do.’

Blood Donations/Transfusions

In early times there were some hesitations on the basis of caste and religion, for blood transfusion,” says Swami Bua, “But now, considering the necessity of blood transfusion during any surgery, people are accepting it.” Blood transfusions differ from organ donations in that the body of the recipient completely replaces the foreign blood.

Dietary Ethics

Yes, vegetarianism is a central aspect of Hinduism, and of even broader import is the ayurvedic wisdom that health is directly dependent upon diet. A Hindu vegetarian who is hospitalized will need to coordinate with the staff to be served proper food unless he can have family or friends bring his meals. The ayurvedic precept is to eat a diet that prevents disease and enhances spiritual life. When ill, a drastic change in diet may be the best cure, as seen in the improvement of heart patients put on a vegetarian diet. “The scriptures recognize the fact that food has a great influence on the mind,” says Swami Tejomayananda, “When food is pure, mind is pure,” state the Upanishads. Mothers prepare food with love in the heart for the children. These positive vibrations are absorbed and the persons who partake of the food imbibe them. Eating is an act of worship.

There remain several areas of concern in medical ethics which will be addressed in future articles in Hinduism Today, including genetic engineering, genetic testing, stem-cell research, cloning and animal to human transplants. If you have insights or comments, feel free to e-mail them to us at letters@hindu.org.