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# Working Abroad in Ghana: Cultural Considerations in Radiologic Science

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**M**any countries are experiencing a shortage of radiologic science professionals, prompting an increasing number of foreign technologists to move to those countries. Some technologists accept the challenge because they want to apply their skills where the need is greatest. Financial reasons entice others, whereas still others are drawn by the opportunity to learn or experience something new. Whatever the individual motivation for this migration, the result is that a growing global need is being addressed.<sup>1</sup>

Working in a setting where the cultural aspects (eg, language, food, customs, traditions) are unfamiliar can be challenging. Culture shapes how people think and act, as well as how they interpret certain actions; it plays a role in every situation, including when patients receive medical care. Radiologic technologists who strive to learn about the people they serve experience fewer clashes and conflicts inherent in cross-cultural communication.<sup>2</sup> In addition, adopting patient interaction practices that consider the prevailing cultural norms results in more patient cooperation and satisfaction during imaging examinations.

This article discusses some of the patient interaction practices preferred in Ghana. However, because Ghana is a multicultural society, the norms described in this article are by no means endemic to the entire country. Foreign technologists likely will encounter varying patient practices and preferences, depending on the area of the country in which they work.

## Gestures

Medical imaging conversations in Ghana can be challenging because of the diversity of languages in the country; although the official language is English, about 80 languages are spoken. This situation often prompts the use of gestures to communicate. A gesture is a definite physical movement that strengthens verbal communication or expresses a particular notion or sentiment.<sup>3</sup> Gestures primarily are made with the hands and arms but can include the head, shoulders, legs, and feet. Just as cultures differ, so too do the meanings of certain gestures.<sup>3</sup> In Ghana, for example, using the left hand, for gesturing or for anything else, is considered disrespectful, insulting, and highly provocative.<sup>4,5</sup> This norm has roots in Ghana's cultural and religious history. The left hand is thought of as the "unclean" or "toilet" hand.

A technologist should use his or her right hand to take the request forms or other material from patients and when handing anything to patients. In addition, the left hand should not be used to direct patients (eg, to sit, lie, stand, or follow) or to wave to them.<sup>4,6</sup> For example, if a technologist needs a patient to lie on the examination table, he or she can communicate the request by saying it or by gesturing with the right hand. Alternatively, both hands can be used to direct patients, but never only the left. However, in circumstances where the left hand must be used, the statement, "sorry for left," must accompany the action or gesture.

## Greetings

Greetings are acts of courtesy in Ghana that show acknowledgement, respect, and concern for others. To ignore a greeting or fail to greet someone is a serious insult. Patients expect to be greeted verbally, with a good morning or good afternoon, and with their title. If a patient is a professor, for example, the word *professor* should be used as a prefix to the name. If a patient's title is not known, use *mister* or *madam*. It is discourteous to speak to or refer to a patient without using his or her title, especially when he or she is older than the person speaking. In order of preference, a verbal expression of greeting is preferred over a handshake, and a handshake is preferred over a head nod.<sup>6</sup> Some Ghanaians will snap their middle fingers with those of the person they are shaking hands with, which produces a sound. It is acceptable for a technologist to snap the patient's finger back during a handshake greeting. In addition, the correct order for greeting a group of people is from right to left, regardless of the age, gender, or status of the people being greeted, and this order must be respected.<sup>5</sup>

## Eye Contact

Evidence suggests that eye contact influences social cognitive functions and plays a critical function in regulating face-to-face communication.<sup>7</sup> The increased social interaction among people of diverse cultural settings is revealing cultural differences in the use of eye contact. Some cultures value direct eye contact during conversations, while others, like some Ghanaians, do not.<sup>8</sup> Toastmasters International's claim that "failure to meet another person's gaze when speaking implies disinterest, lack of confidence, insincerity, or chicanery" runs contrary to the norm in Ghana, where a lack of eye contact during communication is a sign of respect, and direct eye contact is viewed as rude and threatening.<sup>3</sup> When attending to a patient, a technologist should use intermittent eye contact. This approach demonstrates professional genuineness and that the focus of his or her attention is on the patient. However, communicating with the face predominantly turned down or turned away from the patient is a sign of rudeness.

## Please

Globally, the word *please* is considered a polite, but optional, way to ask for something. In Ghana, the use

of the word is required during formal and informal conversations.<sup>6</sup> In some parts of the country, tribes even say it before they insult or swear at someone. When attending to patients, technologists should use please often during the conversation. For example, the technologist would say, "Please, have you drunk water for the ultrasound procedure?" Similarly, if asking the patient why he or she arrived late to the appointment, the technologist should say, "Please, why did you come late?"

## Beliefs

Superstition is belief in the supernatural, or in customs, rites, and rituals that are not based in logic.<sup>9</sup> In Ghana, cultural beliefs can greatly influence a patient's willingness to receive health care. For example, an 18-year-old patient presented at the radiology department with a condition that required the use of intravenous contrast. The patient refused the procedure because she was not allowed to receive a needle injection without consulting the family deity. She cancelled her appointment, consulted the deity, then came back and consented to the procedure. Because situations like this are common, technologists who work in Ghana must understand how to navigate their patients' beliefs to be effective in their jobs.<sup>10,11</sup>

A belief in supernatural elements, such as soul eaters and bewitchment, also is common in Ghana, and many people wear talismans around their waists, ankles, knees, or abdomens to protect them from attacks by these dangerous elements.<sup>12,13</sup> Although a technologist will explain that these items need to be removed before the examination to prevent artifacts on the images, some patients will be reluctant to remove them. These patients must be allowed to decide whether to heed the instruction; however, if they refuse, the procedure should not continue.

## Consent

Some cultural beliefs and norms in some areas of Ghana limit women's use of health care services.<sup>14</sup> One such norm is that men are the head of the household and hold ultimate decision-making power, even regarding their wives' health care.<sup>10</sup> In some ethnic groups, for example, a wife must obtain her husband's consent for a radiography examination, and when a provider speaks

to the wife, it is the husband who responds for her. This cultural norm is fading, especially in the more urban areas of the country. It is, however, worth mentioning so that technologists who choose to work in Ghana are prepared if faced with the situation.

### Conclusion

Because of the growing demand for qualified radiologic technologists and other medical personnel in service-limited areas across the world, the number of these professionals working abroad is increasing. Working in an unfamiliar cultural setting can be challenging because people from different cultures have various ways of looking at the world, and their values and norms for interaction also can vary. Therefore, understanding cultural standards is crucial to providing quality patient care. The key attributes required to interact respectfully and successfully with Ghanaian patients include:

- avoiding the use of the left hand
- addressing them with appropriate titles
- greeting them verbally or with a handshake
- keeping eye contact to a minimum when communicating
- using the word *please* when addressing them or asking them questions
- respecting their beliefs

Taking time to understand a culture can be a rewarding experience that can lead to fewer cultural clashes and conflicts.

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