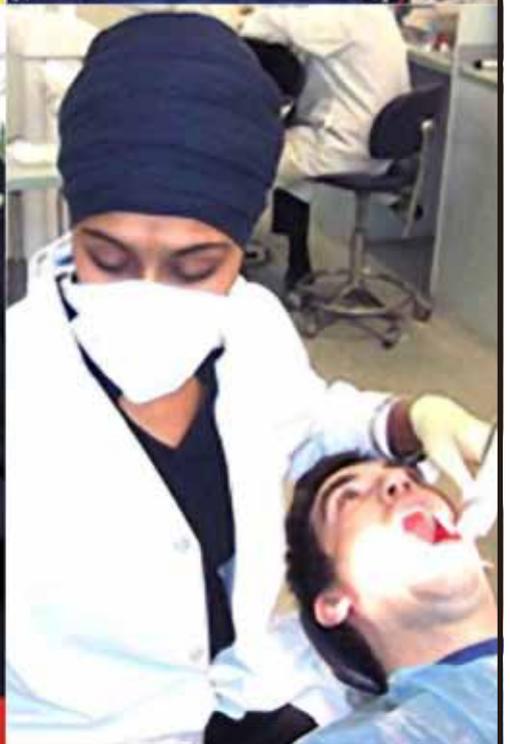
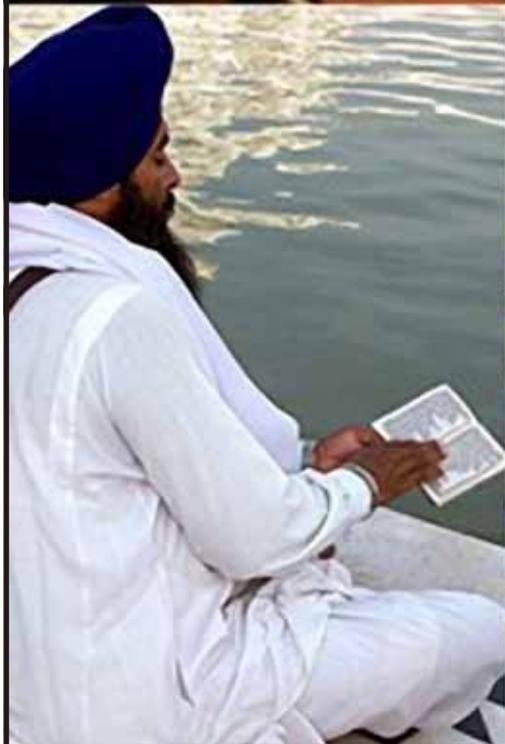


SIKHS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS



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Purpose

The purpose of the toolkit is to provide practical guidance on the issues which may arise with Sikh employees or service users. While many organisations employ Sikhs who are themselves able and willing to advise employers on Sikh matters, it is important to bear in mind the diversity of traditions and practices within the Sikh community. The toolkit seeks to provide comprehensive, reliable and objective information that reflects the views of the widest possible number of Sikhs. To that end, we have extensively consulted with a wide range of Sikh organisations and individuals.

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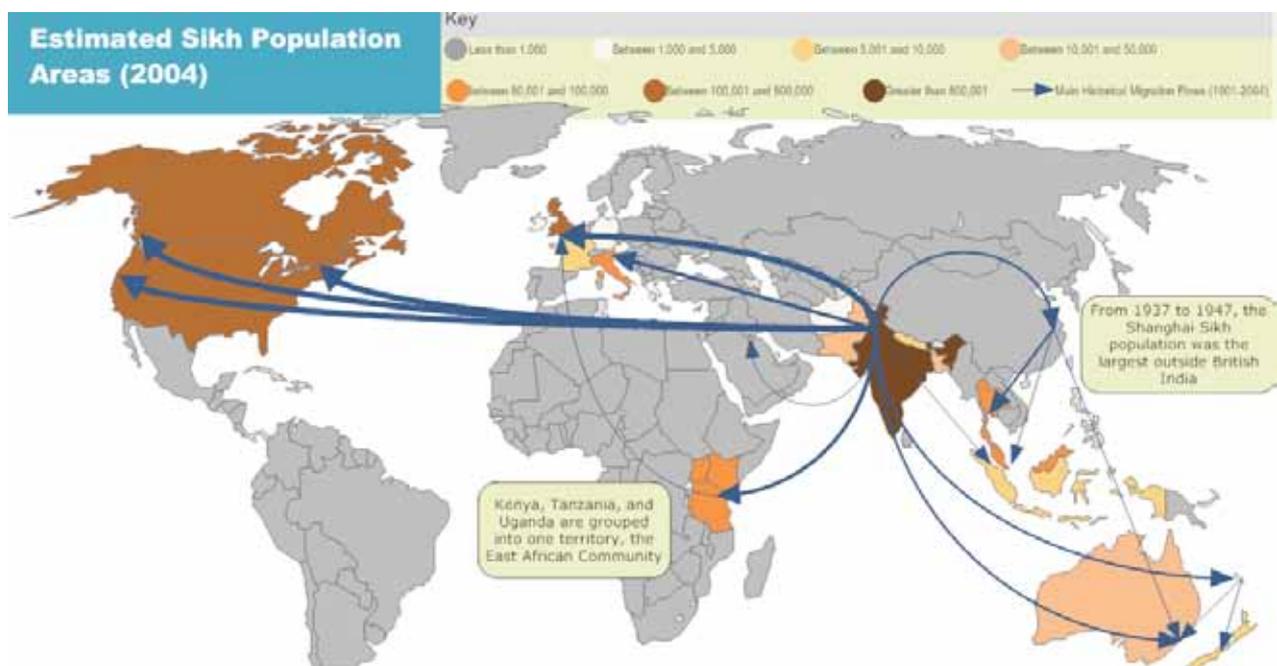
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Who are the Sikhs?

Sikhs are among the very few communities in Britain who are both a religious and ethnic group and hence an exceptional minority. The only other significant group in the UK with such a dual status is the Jewish community.

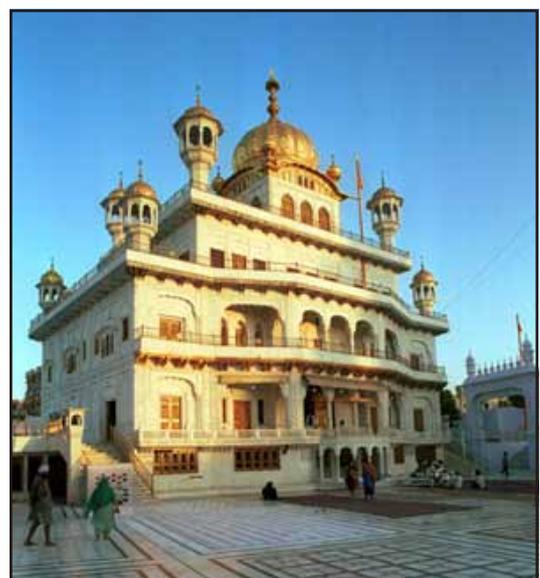
Sikhs are a significant religious and ethnic minority in Britain. 350,000 people identified themselves as Sikhs in the 2001 census. While Sikhs are to be found in all areas of the United Kingdom, they are mainly concentrated in West and East London, North Kent, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire. Sikhs in Britain generally have their origins in the Punjab, particularly those areas which form part



of India. However, the majority of Sikhs in this country are now British-born. Those Sikhs who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s mainly moved from the Punjab. Later a significant number came from the Asian communities of post-colonial East Africa. There are also some 5000 to 6000 Sikhs from Afghanistan. In addition, although Sikhs do not seek to expand their numbers by attracting converts, some conversions have taken place. Such Sikhs may be of Caucasian, African, Afro-Caribbean or East Asian appearance.

Sikhs as a religious group

Sikhi is the world's newest major monopantheistic faith, dating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century CE. Its founder, Guru Nanak, was born in the Punjab in 1469, in an area now part of Pakistan. Guru Nanak was succeeded by nine living Gurus, the last of whom left this abode in 1708. The last human Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, ordained that he would be replaced, not by a person, but by teachings of the ten Gurus compiled in a text, the Guru Granth Sahib. The Guru Granth Sahib, as the living Guru, is treated as a living being. The practice





of reverence goes far beyond that associated with the Bible and the Koran by Christians and Muslims. The word Sikh is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning disciple and learner.

There is no supreme authority, other than the Guru Granth Sahib, within Sikhi. There is neither a formal priesthood nor a clergy. However, the city of Amritsar and the Sri Harmandir Sahib (known in English as the Golden Temple) is the centre of the Sikh world. Within the Sri Harmandir Sahib complex is an institution called Sri Akal Takht Sahib. Here decisions on interpretations, Sikh practices and community policies are made and announced. It has an international role in that Gurdwaras and, in fact, Sikhs worldwide tend to accept the authority of Sri Akal Takht Sahib and decisions made there.

Traditionally Sikhs used to gather in large numbers periodically to decide on important matters of practice, to take community decisions and to maintain support networks. This was called the Surbutt Khalsa. Decisions were taken by consensus. This form of collective decision-making has rarely taken place since the early twentieth century because of the logistics involved.

The closest organisation to a Sikh collective body now is the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee which is charged by Indian law (Sikh Gurdwaras Act 1925) with the administration of the Sikh holy places and the oversight of historic gurdwaras in the Punjab. Its expertise in religious issues is generally acknowledged by Sikhs worldwide.

But final decisions regarded as authoritative are announced at Sri Akal Takht.

Gurdwaras are places of congregation, worship, listening to the teachings of Guru Granth Sahb and centres of community activities. Their role is explained below.

In religious terms, a Sikh is defined in Chapter 1, Article 1 of the Sikh Code of Conduct and Conventions (known as the Rehat Maryada) as:

Any human being who faithfully believes in:

- i. One Immortal Being,
- ii. Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Sahib to Guru Gobind Singh Sahib,
- iii. The Guru Granth Sahib,
- iv. The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and
- v. the baptism (or initiation service) bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion, is a Sikh.

This text is the result of a decades-long process of consultation which secured general agreement among the Sikhs on the fundamentals of Sikhi. The basic principles of Sikhi are the duty to meditate and pray, to earn an honest living and to share one's wealth with the community and world at large.



Mandla v Dowell Lee, 1983 House of Lords gives the legal definition of Sikhs.

“In my opinion, for the purposes of the 1976 Act a group of persons defined by reference to ethnic origins must possess some of the characteristics of a race, namely group descent, a group of geographical origin and a group history. The evidence shows that the Sikhs satisfy these tests. They are more than a religious sect, they are almost a race and almost a nation. As a race, the Sikhs share a common colour, and a common physique based on common ancestors from that part of the Punjab which is centred on Amritsar. They fail to qualify as a separate race because in racial origin prior to the inception of Sikhism they cannot be distinguished from other inhabitants of the Punjab. As a nation the Sikhs defeated the Moghuls, and established a kingdom in the Punjab which they lost as a result of the first and second Sikh wars they fail to qualify as a separate nation or as a separate nationality because their kingdom never achieved a sufficient degree of recognition or permanence.

The Sikhs qualify as a group defined by ethnic origins because they constitute a separate and distinct community derived from the racial characteristics I have mentioned.

Lord Justice Templeman, House of Lords judgment in Mandla v. Dowell Lee, 1983

This rehat maryada is the basic set of principles and life. All religious Sikhs accept the rehat maryada as the basic standard. However, some Sikhs seminaries or institutions tend to build upon this with more extensive set of practices.

Sikhi is an egalitarian world view, hostile to caste divisions and, unusually for a world religion, does not prevent women from holding the highest offices within the community.

A minority of Sikhs undergo an initiation ceremony known as Amrit and are known as Amritdhari. Traditionally Amritdhari has been translated as “baptised”. However, this underestimates the level of commitment and the importance of the conscious decision required to become an Amritdhari. Such Sikhs tend to play a bigger role within the Sikh community and its organisations.

However the Sikhs are more than a religious community. In the UK the Sikhs have been recognised as an ethnic community. In 1983, the House of Lords, in Mandla v Dowell Lee, decided that “the Sikhs remain a group of persons forming a community recognisable by ethnic origins”. This community includes people of divergent or no religious belief who nevertheless consider themselves to be Sikhs, and are considered as such by other members of the Sikh community.

Different Sikhs may have varying degree of commitments to the officially recognised teachings of the Faith. Generally these are 3 levels:

Amritdhari or Khalsa (initiated Sikhs) who have sworn to comply with all the requirements of the Sikh faith.

Keshdhari Sikhs who wear the turban do not cut their hair and wear beards but may or may not be religiously observant.

Other Sikhs who, while not following all the precepts of the Sikh faith, who cut their hair, and do not wear turbans or beards but who identify with, and are accepted by the Sikhs also constitute part of the Sikh ethnic community. As this last category will almost certainly be of Asian origin, its members are protected by the general prohibitions on discrimination in the Race Relations Act. However, such Sikhs are likely to share many of the values and practices of religiously observant Sikhs, particularly in relation to the acceptance of obligations to the extended family. They may also observe some of the Sikhi practices and holy days.



Practices of the Sikhs

Sikh dress code

There are some practices of the Sikhs related to dress code which need to be appreciated and noted. The Sikh dress code is of particular significance. Sikhs are enjoined to wear the five Kakkars (the five K's). These are the Kesh, the Kara, the Kirpan, Kanga, and Kachera.

The Kesh

KESH (hair) is associated with the most visible aspect of Sikhi, the turban. Sikhs do not cut their hair and the turban is worn over the hair to protect it and to keep it in order. While the rule applies to Sikh men, women may also choose to wear the turban - as many increasingly do. However, most women tend to wear a 'chunni'. This looks like a long head scarf. The Kesh on the head are usually covered by a turban.



The colour of the turban is essentially a matter of personal choice and does not convey any specific message. For most Sikhs, the turban can be of any colour. The most common colours are black, blue, white and saffron. Saffron is a traditional colour of truth in India and sometimes worn on special days.



The style of the turban is also a personal choice. Some Sikhs tend to wear a traditional form of turban which is round while most others tend to tie it in more stylistic types. A few Sikhs tend to starch their turbans and will take it off as well as wear it without having to tie it every time. However, most Sikhs tend to tie it afresh every time they wear it.

There is a great deal of history and reverence attached with the Sikh turban. It is worn with honour and pride and Sikhs will not allow it to be removed in public. A keshdhari Sikh only feels fully dressed when he/she has a turban on. The turban is not strictly speaking considered a religious item in itself by some Sikhs for two reasons, On the one hand, it serves to conceal the Kesh, the wearing of which is a religious practice. On the other hand, quite a few Sikhs keep the Kesh and wear the turban who are not religiously observant or indeed believers. They feel it is part of their ethnic identity.

The Turban at work

A turban wearing Sikh adds to the visible diversity at a work place and in fact should not present any particular problem for an employer. It is illegal to discriminate against anyone wearing the turban under the terms of the Race Relations Act. (see above *Mandla v. Dowell Lee*). It is generally considered that the decision also means that it would be illegal to discriminate against a turban-wearing Sikh woman¹.

Sikhs and their turbans enjoy a legal status in some respects. The Motor-Cycle Crash Helmets (Religious Exemption) Act exempts Sikhs from the legal requirement to wear a crash helmet when riding a motor cycle. The exemption is repeated in section 16 (2) of the Road Traffic Act 1988. Sikhs with turbans are also exempt from the requirement to wear helmets while riding horses under the terms of Horses (Protective Headgear for Young Riders) Regulations 1992,

¹ There is evidence that schools who attempted to impose restrictions on the female turban would be found guilty of discrimination, notwithstanding the decisions surrounding Islamic headdress such as *Begum v Denbigh High School* where a school successfully banned the jilbab.

In the construction industry, Section 11 of the Employment Act 1989 provides exemptions for Sikhs from the requirement to wear a helmet. In case of accidents, the employer's liability is limited to the extent of the injury likely to have occurred if a helmet had been worn. For the purposes of the Race Relations Act, any attempt to require a turban-wearing Sikh to wear a helmet is an act of unjustifiable discrimination. Nor can the exemption be challenged as discrimination in favour of one religious group over another.

The kesh also involves the beard. Most Sikhs will find no problem with combining the beard with respect for necessary health and safety equipment and procedures. Some, however, believe that the beard should be allowed to flow freely and may encounter problems in complying with regulations. Our experience is that normally a solution can be found through discussion.



Sikh practices may pose some challenges to certain areas of field work in the emergency services such as the police and fire service.

The Department of Communities and Local Government announced in March 2009 that the Fire Service has now resolved some of the issues surrounding uniforms for so that it is now possible for a turban-wearing Sikh in control and non-operational roles to comply with the requirements of the Service.

However, it remains the case that a beard prevents a person from serving as a firefighter. Sikhs wish to see the development of appropriate respirators, masks and hoods so that this prohibition can be eliminated.

While there are many turban wearing- serving Sikh police officers, efforts are being made to find a solution to the riot helmet problem. Research into the possibility of turbans which meet the safety requirements of the police is on-going. While some Sikhs make a personal decision and are willing to wear the helmet, others find this compromises their religious commitment and covering the turban is not acceptable. Such officers may be restricted in the tasks and areas to which they may be assigned. Work is continuing on finding a material for a bullet-resistant, flame-resistant and riot-suitable turban.

It is also the case that there are different policies in operation in different police forces. In some forces the inability to complete public order training has a more substantial impact on career progression than in others. National guidelines have not yet been agreed but we would hope that best practice is adopted nationwide.



The Kirpan

The Kirpan is a curved blade made of steel or iron kept in a gaatra (a device for attaching the kirpan to the body and ensuring its safekeeping). It is a mistake to translate the Kirpan into English as knife, sword or dagger. The word is derived from "Kirpa" meaning compassion, and "Aan" meaning honour.

Amritdhari Sikhs are required to wear the Kirpan. It is generally agreed that the Kirpan should not be worn by non-Amritdhari Sikhs.

Religiously observant Sikhs enjoy an exemption from the criminal law under the terms of Section 139 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and section 4 of the Offensive Weapons Act 1996.

Misuse of the Kirpan is virtually unknown in the UK and in other countries where there are large concentrations of Sikhs, such as Canada and the US.

Most Sikhs tend to wear it under their clothes. Where questions arise, it is important that employers are aware of the importance of the Kirpan to Amritdhari Sikhs and that Sikh employees make efforts to explain its significance to their colleagues if the need arises.

Nevertheless, there may be certain specific cases where problems may have to be resolved.

Secure areas where staff and visitors have to pass through scanners should not, in principle, be a problem providing those operating the system are aware of the significance of the Kirpan to Sikhs and of the legal status of the Kirpan.

The Health Service

A number of issues have at times arisen in hospitals both with patients and visitors. National guidelines throughout the NHS hopefully would ensure that patients and visitors would be allowed to wear their Kirpans at all times. It is particularly important for the emotional condition of Amritdhari Sikh patients that their Kirpans not be removed during their stay in hospital.

It is recognised, of course, that this principle cannot apply to those who are being treated for serious mental health issues and can no longer be considered mentally competent and responsible for their actions. In such situations, both the authorities and the Sikh community would have the duty to ensure that such patients were in no position to harm themselves or others.

Appendix A deals with the issue of Sikhs and the Health Service in more detail.

Schools

Sikhs are aware that the issue of the Kirpan is very sensitive for schools, particularly in the light of youth crime involving knives. Nevertheless a number of local authorities with large concentrations of Sikhs have drawn up local guidelines with the assistance of local Sikh communities. Best practice suggests that such guidelines should be based on the acknowledgement of the right of Amritdhari school pupils to wear the Kirpan provided the school is informed that they are doing so, that the Kirpan be concealed and be made extremely difficult to remove from its sheath by the bearer, or anyone else. Guidelines on the kirpan will be available from the Department of Communities and Local Government.

The Kara

The Kara is a steel bangle worn on the wrist by both male and female Sikhs. The Kara serves to remind a Sikh of the moral code to which he or she owes allegiance and of the eternal nature of God. It also reminds the Sikhs of the cyclical philosophy of Sikhi.

In 2008, the High Court ruled in favour of a Sikh girl whose school expelled her for violating its no jewellery code by wearing her Kara. (*Watkins-Singh v Aberdare Girls High School and Rhondda Cynon Taf Unitary Authority*).

The Court ruled that although wearing the kara is not a requirement for non-Amritdhari Sikhs, it is of exceptional importance to the racial and religious identity of observant Sikhs. The argument that indirect discrimination could only occur if wearing the kara was an absolute requirement was rejected. Indirect discrimination still took place if a person was prevented from wearing an object which was of exceptional importance to their religious or racial identity. The Court also ruled that that the kara was an unobtrusive object and the Court also pointed out that many schools have no problem with the kara. It also highlighted the good practice in local authorities such as Redbridge, Birmingham and Swansea.

Extracts from the Sarika Watkins-Singh judgment.

“The claimant is not obliged by her religion to wear a Kara, it is clearly in her case an extremely important indication of her faith and this is a view shared for good reason by very many other Sikhs

On the facts of this case, I believe that there would be a “a particular disadvantage” or “detriment” if a pupil is forbidden from wearing an item when (a) that person genuinely believed for reasonable grounds that wearing this item was a matter of exceptional importance to his or her racial identity or his or her religious belief and (b) the wearing of this item can be shown objectively to be of exceptional importance to his or her religion or race, even if the wearing of the article is not an actual requirement of that person’s religion or race.

I have little doubt that the claimant genuinely and honestly attaches exceptional importance to wearing her Kara and thereby satisfies the subjective requirement

I conclude that the claimant suffers a “particular disadvantage” or a “detriment” by not being allowed to wear her Kara at school; the reason for that the wearing of this item can be shown subjectively and objectively to be of exceptional importance to her religion and race as a Sikh even if not a requirement of the religion or race.

I conclude that by not being allowed to wear the Kara the claimant is suffering “a particular disadvantage” or “detriment”.

Mr Justice Silber

Another situation which could lead to misunderstandings is the NHS policy of “bare below the elbows”. This policy would appear to preclude the kara. However, such a rigid application of the principle is unnecessary provided standard hygiene rules are applied. In our experience, most NHS Trusts have recognised that the kara should be accommodated in the same way as are wedding rings.

The Kachera

The kachera is an underbreech worn particularly by Amritdhari Sikhs and some other Sikhs as well. This does not have any significance for work practices and public places.

The Kanga

The kanga is a small comb. It is used by Sikhs to comb their hair and beards. It signifies the need to uphold high standards of hygiene, discipline and cleanliness. This too does not have any significance for work practices or public places. Male Sikhs and women who wear a turban tuck it under the turban. Women generally tend to hang it in their hair.

Dietary Practices

Many Amritdhari Sikhs are vegetarian. Even those who do eat meat cannot eat halal or kosher meat or any sacrificial meat. The food supplied in Gurdwaras is always vegetarian so that it can be eaten by everyone. There is also a significant number who will not eat eggs. Amritdhari Sikhs are also precluded from consuming alcohol or tobacco. Many Sikhs who have not taken Amrit also follow these dietary rules. Others may be indistinguishable in their practices and behaviour from non Sikhs.



Prayers

Prayers are normally performed individually upon rising, before dinner and before bed. The morning prayer usually lasts between 30 – 45 minutes. Evening prayers are usually of 30 minutes duration but can take longer.

Given the timing of prayers, there will be little problem except for shift workers. As prayer is an individual rather than collective matter, it should be possible to accommodate individual needs. However many Sikhs go to a Gurdwara to pray in congregation in the morning and in the evening and may wish to get there in time.



Sikh Institutions

The Gurdwara is the religious and community centre of the Sikhs in the local region. The Gurdwara is accessible to anyone regardless of religion, class, race or gender. But there are some practices in the Gurdwara such as covering of the head and taking shoes off before entering the main congregation hall which are required of all. Moreover services are conducted by Amritdari Sikhs. Most major Gurdwaras start their services at about 4 or 5 am. The Gurdwara is open throughout the day. Evening services usually take place from 5pm to 8 pm. Some Gurdwaras are open until 10 pm.

Almost all Gurdwaras have langar. This is a practice of free food eaten in congregation in a hall. Bigger Gurdwaras have langar from 6 am to 8 pm. Anyone can eat langar. Langar is either funded from Gurdwara funds or individual Sikh families may sponsor langar on a day or over a 3 day period.



There is a special continuous reading service of Sri Guru Granth Sahib called Akhand Path held over 48 hours, usually starting on Friday and ending on Sunday morning. Often families may hold this at home or at a Gurdwara. Families hold this either as thanks giving, on birth of a child, or at death of a family member or for other occasions. It is likely that members of the family may seek leave to partake in the event as they are expected to volunteer their services or assist in cooking food or serving it.

Family Obligations

Sikhs in general have a wider range of family obligations than is typical of British society. Obligations to the extended family are greater for Sikhs than those in the typical nuclear family. Looking after older or ill family members is regarded as one's duty. Individual Sikhs may therefore request leave in situations which might not arise in other sections of the community, e.g to accompany an elderly relative or a child outside the nuclear family to a hospital appointment.

Sikh Relations with Other Communities

While being a distinctive, self-reliant and cohesive community, Sikhs have no difficulty in interacting with others. Sikhs do not seek to convert others or consider other religions as in any way lacking in legitimacy. While expecting respect from others, Sikhs also respect others. There is no Sikh concept of 'Infidel' or 'Heathen'.

As a way of life hostile to sectarianism, caste divisions and conflict between cultures, Sikhs have no problems in working and living with people from other traditions.

There are no issues of ritual purity or doctrine which may interfere with relations with other employees, either in the workplace or in any social encounters among work colleagues. Research has shown that some employers are under the misapprehension that Sikhs cannot take part in work-related social events. This is generally incorrect and no such assumptions should be made although some Sikhs, as may members of any community, may avoid events where alcohol is a central purpose or accompaniment.

The Diversity of Sikhs

All Sikhs believe in the Guru Granth Sahib as their guide. The institution of taking Amrit (initiation service) is accepted by all as an ideal. Mainstream Sikhs follow the practices and interpretations that are agreed at Sri Akal Takht Sahib in the Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple). There are a few schools of interpretation which may have their own practices and institutional systems. Some groups of Sikhs may follow highly spiritual persons as their guide in interpretation of Guru Granth Sahib and some Gurdwaras are led by such a person. However most Gurdwaras have democratically elected committees and many Sikhs do not believe in spiritual leaders other than Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

There are no religiously sanctioned castes in Sikhs. However a superficial form of caste is sometimes adhered to by some Sikhs as continuing aspects of wider Indian culture. These are based on traditional family occupations such as farming, carpentry, trading and had some social relevance when people felt secure in marrying within their own occupation group. However caste was never



observed in the Gurdwara or in the broader Sikh polity and organisation. Castes have now become meaningless and are fast falling apart as people no longer stick to their traditional occupations.

There are some religious groups who follow a living human being as a Guru but also take guidance from Sri Guru Granth Sahib as well as some other religious texts. They sometimes have the same practices as Sikhs such as wearing turbans and keeping unshorn hair and may even call themselves Sikhs in official censuses although they are not considered part of the Sikh religious community by Sri Akal Takht Sahib.

Different Days

Traditionally the Sikhs have followed the lunar calendar as was followed in most parts of South Asia. However since 1998 there has been a move to adopt a solar calendar which is called the Nanakshahi calendar. Not all Sikhs have accepted the solar calendar and they continue to observe holy days on the lunar calendar. This may cause some confusion at a workplace when two Sikhs following the different calendars may ask for a day off on different day for the same function. However the important fact is they are only a few days apart and a Sikh may only take one of the alternative days off.

Holy days

The main Sikh festival is Vaisakhi. This is the day when the initiation service was started. It is in April. The other most important festivals are Parkash Guru Nanak, the birth day of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak, Parkash Guru Granth Sahib when the Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Text) was first installed, Guru Gadhi Guru Granth Sahib, when the Granth Sahib was given Guruship. There is also a three day festival of Amritdhari Sikhs called Hola Mohalla which is not observed by all Sikhs. Bandi Chor day falls on Diwali. It is a day that celebrates the deep commitment of Sikhs to freedom of conscience and human rights of all regardless of their belief. Most Sikhs will only ask for a day off on one or two of the holy days.

Appendix A

Sikhs and the NHS

Caring for Sikh Patients

From its earliest origins, Sikhs have been culturally adaptable and as a result a variety of forms and movements have developed, each with different traditions. There are also differences in the personal level of devotion or observance of individuals. It is therefore vital to ask patients or their family what is relevant for them individually. Never assume anything, always ask.

Daily Prayer and Worship

The Sikh beliefs are based on the teachings of the Ten Gurus (Supreme Teachers) and the Guru Granth Sahib (The Sikh Scriptures). The religion believes in one God (Ek Onkar) and the interconnection of all living beings and non living things as part of the One. Thus creation is considered as part of the Creator. The spiritual message taught by Guru Nanak had 3 aspects to it:

1. Meditation - which now involves chanting hymns composed by the Gurus
2. Honest toil - earning a livelihood by honest means
3. Sharing - giving to the poor and needy. Contributing one tenth of their income for good causes

Daily meditational prayers are called Nit-Nam and the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib are a very important part of Sikh life. The Morning Prayer consists of: Jap Ji Sahib, Jaap Sahib, Chaupai Sahib, Tva Prasaad Sawaye and Anand Sahib. This prayer can be recited anywhere after a shower or bath and before breakfast.

The evening programme consists of Rehraas Sahib and Kirten Sohila. The former is recited or read before supper and the latter before retiring to bed.

A Sikh patient may have with him/her a small Gutka or Scriptures in a small booklet form, containing the morning and evening prayers. This is wrapped in a clean cloth and should be kept in a clean place and respected.

A Sikh patient who is initiated (Amritdhari) can be recognised by his/her 5 K's.

1. Kesh - long hair which is uncut
2. Kanga - comb to keep the hair clean
3. Kara - a steel bangle worn on the right wrist
4. Kirpan - a small sword
5. Kachera - underwear

The need for Sikh patients to wear the 5 K's should be respected unless they have to be removed for medical purposes only. For instance the need to take off metal for a MRI investigation or to shave hair to take a skin graft. If this is the case then it should be explained to the patient and their family for consent. Some patients may not agree and this should also be respected.

Any patient who is too ill to recite the hymns should be allowed to listen to an audio version, or any member of his family or a religious official should be able to recite for him.

An initiated Sikh is not allowed to shave the hair from any part of the body. If this is necessary for an operation then the patient or his next of kin should be consulted. For medical reasons a Sikh may allow the minimum of hair to be removed.

Sikh patients may wear a smaller version of a turban just to cover their hair while in hospital. Female Sikhs may also wear a chunni or dupatta at all times.

Holy Scriptures

The Guru Granth Sahib is the book of scriptures of the Sikhs. More than a holy book, It is considered as the living Guru. It is written in the Gurmukhi script of Punjab, and contains the writings of the ten Gurus. It also contains verses from other spiritual leaders of the 14th and 15th centuries from a variety of religions and creeds.

The Guru Granth Sahib is held in great reverence and wrapped in cloth in the Sikh Gurdwara, where it is set on planquin and is opened for prayer each morning by the priest. At the end of the day Guru Granth Sahib is closed after evening prayer, Rehraas Sahib and Kirten Sohila, and put away to rest. Some Sikh families also keep the Guru Granth Sahib at home and follow the same practice.

Extracts from the Guru Granth Sahib, particularly containing daily prayers, are often kept in small booklet form, called Pothis, by Sikhs. These should also be treated with great respect.



Holy Days and Festivals

The main holy days for Sikhs are the birthday of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of the faith, in November, and the Vaisakhi day, the birth of the Khalsa, which falls in April. Sikhs also celebrate the birth of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, the first installation of the Guru Granth Sahibi and the martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur. Guru Arjun Dev was martyred by the ruling authorities for sticking by his principles and beliefs. Guru Tegh Bahadur was martyred by the rulers for standing for freedom of conscience.

Many also celebrate the festival of Bandi Chor Diwas - the release from prison of Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, the 6th Guru - which falls in November.

Appearance

Sikh men and women may wear a Turban or a small Keski (small turban). This is so that they keep their head covered as a mark of respect. The Sikh male may also have a long flowing beard. Many Sikh women wear the Salwar Kameez and many may cover their heads with the chunni or dupatta.

Diet and Hygiene

Although there is a lot of variation among the Sikh communities, it is important to respect the dietary practices of each individual.. Amritdhari and older Sikhs are likely to be stricter and more concerned about what they eat.

Most Amritdhari and some other devout Sikh men and women are vegetarian. They do not eat meat, fish, eggs or anything made with, or containing, them. Some may prefer to eat only food that is brought from home so that they can be sure of what they are eating. Some may feel that even if utensils, serving dishes and cooking pots are kept separate, vegetarian food served from the same trolley as meat is unacceptable.

In the Sikh religion it is forbidden to eat Halal and Kosher or other sacrificial meat. Most Sikhs will not eat Beef. It is important that even when cooking, the same utensils should not be used to cook for Sikhs which have been used to cook or store Halal, Kosher or beef.

Most Amritdhari and other devout Sikhs do not drink or smoke. Some feel strongly about not being exposed to tobacco smoke.

All Sikhs are required to bathe every morning and maintain a high degree of cleanliness.

Gender Issues

As with all Asian patients, Sikh women may feel more comfortable with female health care staff. Consideration should be given to their modesty when being dressed for x-ray or surgery. Long dressing gowns should be provided to meet the above requirements.

Where a particular trust has not yet attained the national objective of eliminating mixed sex wards, Sikh women patients will feel more comfortable in a ward which has women patients only. The same applies for Sikh men.

Visiting

It is a Sikh custom for the family, friends and other members of the community to visit sick relatives. It is an act of faith and family way of life. If it is absolutely necessary to restrict visitors to two per bed, explanations should be given to relatives and friends.

The elderly patients need visitors for moral support and assurance.

Birth

The Sikh faith believes that the soul is reborn in many different forms and bodies. During pregnancy the mother is encouraged to go to the Sikh Gurdwara to pray and read or recite the hymns from the Sikh scriptures. It is an important part of the spiritual development of the mother and unborn child. After birth the child is brought home and when the mother is able and well, they will take it to a Sikh Gurdwara for the naming ceremony. This ceremony is mostly done on Sunday during the service.

Death

A dying Sikh may receive comfort from reciting hymns from Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji and patients or relatives may request the service of a Sikh religious official during the last stages of the patient's life. The relatives should be asked to contact the granthi (prayer leader) of the Gurdwara to which they belong, and if no contact is made then the nearest Gurdwara should be contacted through the duty chaplain.

If no relative or family is present at the time of death, then they should be contacted as soon as possible. The body of the deceased should be covered, and should not be sent to the hospital mortuary before the immediate family or relations arrive without the consent of an appropriate relative. The body of the deceased can be handled by the hospital staff.

- Close the eyes
- Close the mouth
- The face of the deceased may be displayed on numerous occasions prior to the funeral - a peaceful expression is desired, therefore it is appreciated if the face is cleaned, straightened if necessary and the eyes and mouth closed.



- Limbs should be straightened and the body covered in a plain white sheet or shroud without religious emblems.

- The five items of faith (the 5 K's) should not be removed from an Amritdari patient

Sikh culture necessitates the carrying out of the funeral as soon as possible after death. It is therefore important to assist in the providing of a death certificate at the earliest possible opportunity thereby enabling the funeral to take place.

All the funeral arrangements are made by the family, who will appoint a funeral director to do all the necessary work.

Sikh religion and faith believes that upon death the soul departs the body. If the need arises on medical terms for a post-mortem then permission should be asked from the next of kin. There are no restrictions for the post-mortem but like most people the Sikhs would rather refrain from this if at all possible. However, there are no religious objections to blood transfusion or organ transplant.

Finally, during the preparation of the body for the funeral, the body is washed by the relatives and family members. Women wash females and men wash males. All this is carried out at the funeral directors. The body is then brought to the Sikh Gurdwara for the last prayers and rites and then taken to the cemetery for cremation. All Sikhs, whether male or female, are cremated.

After the funeral the ashes are collected and scattered in a river or sea.

Further reading

The standard work on Sikhs in Britain is Singh, G and Tatla, D, Singh, Sikhs in Britain: The Making of a Community Sikhs in Britain, Zed Books. London, 2006.

Legal judgments

Mandla v Dowell Lee, 1983 on the turban and the definition of Sikh can be found at: <http://www.minorityrights.org/2780/minority-rights-jurisprudence/mandla-and-another-v-dowell-lee-and-another.html>

Watkins-Singh v Aberdare Girls' High School Governors on the kara can be found at: <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2008/1865.html>

Practical Guidance

Guidance on the kirpan for schools can be found at:

<http://www.bgfl.org/index.cfm?s=1&m=2527&p=2064&filter=1&res=y&kw=sikh+kirpan>

A submission from the British Sikh Consultative Forum to the Department of Communities and Local Government can be found at <http://www.bsfc.org/node/114>

This is a helpful guide to all of the issues relating to the kirpan and reflects the opinions of the vast majority of British Sikhs.

A useful guide to the treating Sikh patients can be found at: <http://pb.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/28/3/93> Caring for Sikh Patients wearing the Kirpan, Swaran P Singh, 2004

In addition, SHRG is happy to advise on specific problems or issues. Please use the contact details given above. The SHRG website at www.shrg.net will also include regular updates of this toolkit as well as further information of relevance to Sikhs.

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Who we are

This toolkit has been produced by the Sikh Human Rights Group. The Sikh Human Rights Group (SHRG) is a group of volunteers and activists with a mutual interest in the protection and promotion of human rights, equality and diversity and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

SHRG is based on the humanitarian principles of Sikh philosophy and its working membership as well as associate membership is available to anyone who prescribes to its principles and objectives of

SHRG was formally established in 1984 in response to the worsening human rights situation in North West India. The group has since increased its sphere of work to include minority rights, the impact of transnational companies, internal conflicts and sustainable development as well as human rights cases from other regions. SHRG work takes the form of human rights activism, academic reports, organisation and participation in relevant conferences. It plays a leading role in resolving questions involving the Sikh community both within the UK and internationally.

It is known for its expertise on matters affecting the Sikh community and its focus on problem-solving both in the UK and internationally. For example, it is involved in ways of resolving the problems created by legislation in France restricting the right to wear a turban.

The Sikh Human Rights Group holds no political position and assumes an impartial and independent approach in its work. The group is open to all who adhere to this approach. The group is funded by non-governmental sources and individuals.

SHRG's membership is not restricted to Sikhs and has members from various cultural traditions.