The Roma Chakra was adopted in 1971 at the First World Romani Congress as the official symbol of the Roma people. The symbol honours the Roma’s Indian heritage. The sixteen spoked wheel reminds the Roma of the wheels of the Vardo, or Wagon, which was home for Roma families for more than a hundred years.
General cultural features and social experience of the Roma

Language:
There are language and literacy issues that have implications for interpretation services and communication.

• Some Roma may only speak some dialect of Romani (the traditional language), many may not speak English and some may speak the language of the country they last lived in, to varying degrees.

• Some Roma may indicate that they are from the last country they lived in while they may not speak its language.

• A common mistake is to confuse Romani with the Romanian language while they are two completely separate languages with different origins.

• Where an interpreter is required it is important to clarify what language will meet the person’s needs best. Those who speak Romani will follow an interpreter speaking the standard dialect.

• Due to the complexities of the language and cultural issues involved it may be more beneficial to source a Roma cultural mediator/interpreter where possible; details of how to source this service are provided at the end of the section.

• Plain language may be necessary in any communication due to potential literacy issues. Written instructions, such as prescriptions, may need to be explained verbally.

Religious contacts and religious practices:
The majority of the Roma in Ireland are Pentecostal and there are also Orthodox and Roman Catholic practitioners. All religious practices, including illness and death-related rituals, will be determined by the religion followed. Clarify the religion of the person and the name of a religious representative.

Gender issues:
Some Roma may prefer to be treated by a same gender practitioner, in particular women. Preferences will need to be checked.

Decision making:
While gender roles are changing and many Roma women now speak for themselves, the traditional norm of a man speaking on behalf of his partner may continue. As with all of these situations, the woman needs to be allowed and sensitively facilitated to determine her healthcare choices.

Family and community visits:
An ill or dying person is likely to have many visitors. Roma representatives have indicated that it is important for the healthcare setting to enquire who will represent the family for visitation management purposes and also to ensure that any cultural needs can be attended to.

Customs to be observed at death:
The Roma are likely to have a preference for bringing the body home as soon as possible. Any delay needs to be explained to the family.

Cleaning and touching the body:
The body may be washed by mortuary staff and dressed in clothes provided by the family.
Initiation ritual/infant baptism:

The approach to the baptism of infants may vary depending on the religion followed. Specific instructions are given in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal sections.
Profile of the Roma Community in Ireland

The word Roma means people. They are the largest ethnic group among EU member states. It is believed that the Roma may have had a historic link to India. The community have been living in Europe for the last thousand years as citizens and have no current connection with India. The Roma have migrated widely across Europe, to the Americas and to North Africa.

The majority of the Roma in Ireland are from Romania, where it is estimated that 2.5% of the population is Roma. Others come mainly from Eastern European countries including Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. All of these people are now full EU citizens.

The Roma tend to adopt the main religion of the country they live in. The majority of the community living in Ireland are Pentecostal (estimated at 70%). There are a few specific Roma Pentecostal Churches and others attend the Romanian Pentecostal Churches. There are also a number of Orthodox and Roman Catholic practitioners and these attend Orthodox Churches and Roman Catholic Church services.

General Cultural Features and Social Experience of the Roma

The Roma are often distinguished by a rich cultural and musical heritage, which has influenced classical music, etc. At the same time, the Roma communities are diverse; hence we need to be cautious in any generalisations that are made about the culture. For example, while the Romani language has its origins in some of the languages of India, there are now various dialects, some of which have been influenced by the countries the Roma settled in, among other things.

The Roma are widely recognised as among the most discriminated ethnic groups in history and have suffered at the hands of a number of political regimes over the centuries. The community continues to experience misunderstanding, intolerance, discrimination and racism across EU member states. This has implications for how many Roma will present themselves and interact with health services and also for their ability to trust interpreters who come from the settled communities of their countries of origin.

Some features of the Roma culture and social experience are given here for guidance. These need to be applied recognising that there is wide diversity and that each person is unique. Additionally, the Roma are changing their lifestyles, as is evident from the points below.

Essential Practice Point

Language: While the group has a traditional language, Romani, there are language and literacy issues that have implications for communication.

- Some Roma may only speak some dialect of Romani (the traditional language), many may not speak English and some may speak the language of the country they last lived in, to varying degrees.
- Some Roma may indicate that they are from the last country they lived in, for example Romania, out of fear of discrimination, while they may not speak its language well, if indeed at all.
• A common mistake is to confuse Romani with the Romanian language; they are two completely separate languages with different origins.

• Where an interpreter is required it is important to clarify what language will meet the person’s needs best and to ascertain if there are issues of trust. This may be the language of the country of origin, be it Romania, Slovakia, etc. While there are differences within the Romani language those who only speak Romani will follow an interpreter speaking the standard dialect.

• Due to the complexities of the language and cultural issues involved it may be more beneficial to source a Roma cultural mediator/interpreter where possible; details of how to source this service are provided at the end of the section.

• Some Roma may have literacy difficulties in any language that they speak; hence, plain language is necessary in any communication about healthcare issues. Written instructions, such as prescriptions, may need to be explained verbally.

• Marriage and birth: Roma women tend to marry young, often before 20 years of age, and tend to have high birth rates.

• Family and tribal bonds: Roma tend to identify with their particular tribe. Extended family is of particular importance with a strong sense of family loyalty and duty. This point is important for family visits in hospital. Cultural mediation may be needed to manage the high number of visitors.

• Role of Women: Traditionally the culture was patriarchal, few women worked in paid employment outside the home and it was not unusual for a male to speak on behalf of his wife or the family. At the same time Roma women in Ireland and elsewhere are participating in education and development activities set up for them and are speaking for themselves. Both the traditional and developing ways of life co-exist among the Roma.

• Clothing: The distinctive traditional clothing of a colourful blouse, long skirt, scarf and jewellery is continued by some Roma women. However, dress sense is changing and many Roma are no longer identifiable by their clothing. Many wear what they wish and prefer Western style clothes. Some Pentecostal followers, in particular, have a modest dress sense in line with the views of their religion.

Care of the ill

Religious contacts and religious practices

Essential Practice Point

As noted in the Profile section, the majority of the community living in Ireland are Pentecostal and there are also Orthodox and Roman Catholic practitioners. All religious practices, including illness and death-related rituals, will be determined by the religion followed.

• It is important to clarify the religion of the person and the name of a religious representative who should be contacted if requested or needed.
Gender issues

Essential Practice Point

Some Roma may prefer to be treated by a same gender practitioner, in particular women. Preferences will need to be checked.

Decision making

Essential Practice Point

Gender roles are changing among the Roma. The traditional norm of a man speaking on behalf of his partner may continue to exist, while many women now speak for themselves. As with all of these situations, the woman needs to be allowed and enabled to determine her healthcare choices.

Blood Transfusion and Organ Transplantation

Roma are likely to follow the religious view on the matter.

Care of the Dying

Family and community visits

Essential Practice Point

Where a person is quite ill or nearing death there are likely to be many visitors from the community. Roma representatives have indicated that it is important for the healthcare setting to enquire who will represent the family so that large numbers can be managed by rotating the visitors at the bedside and also to ensure that any cultural needs can be attended to.

Customs to be observed at death

Essential Practice Point

The Roma are likely to have a preference for bringing the body home as soon as possible. Any delay needs to be explained to the family.

Cleaning and touching the body

Essential Practice Point

The body may be washed by mortuary staff and dressed in clothes provided by the family.

Postmortem requirements

The Roma have a preference for burying the body whole and undamaged. Any delay necessary for postmortem will need to be explained sensitively in light of this and the preference for bringing the person home for the traditional viewing of the body.

Interment ritual

- Traditionally the family host a viewing of the body in the home for two nights and this tends to be followed irrespective of religious affiliation.
- Burial is the norm among the Roma.
**Bereavement**

Traditionally, black clothing is worn for up to one year following the death of a close relative and men do not shave. This tends to be followed irrespective of religious affiliation.

**Religious Icons and Symbols**

**Personal and religious items**

Jewellery is a symbol of status among Roma who more closely observe traditional customs. Traditionally men and women wear jewellery that has family and cultural significance. All jewellery needs to be returned to the family on death.

- Orthodox followers may have a baptismal candle at the bedside as well as statues and icons.
- Catholic Church followers also may have statues and icons at the bedside.
- Pentecostal followers may have a copy of the Christian Bible.

**Use of religious symbols**

- Pentecostalists do not use the crucifix as part of their tradition. The crucifix may be displayed for Orthodox or Roman Catholic followers but not Pentecostalists.
- Candles and a plain cross are appropriate for all Roma.

**Additional Notes on Maternity and Paediatric Care**

**Initiation ritual/infant baptism**

**Essential Practice Point**

The approach to infant baptism is likely to vary depending on the religion followed. Infants born to Roman Catholic parents are normally baptised if in danger of death. In the case of a threat to the life of an infant Orthodox Churches prefer that the child be baptised. Specific instructions are given in each of these sections. Pentecostal followers normally do not baptise an infant even if there is a threat to life.

**Foetal, infant and child death**

There are no cultural practices above the religious ones described in specific sections.

**Mementos of a deceased child**

There are no religious objections from the Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Pentecostal Churches in giving a memento of a deceased child (lock of hair, handprint or footprint) to parents. This should first be checked with the parents.
Developing a Roma Community
Contact

For information about the Roma Community:
Ms Sara Russell, Roma Programme Coordinator, Pavee Point Travellers’ Centre, 46 North Great Charles Street, Dublin 1.
Tel: 01 8780255
Website: www.paveepoint.ie

For information and Roma Cultural Mediation contact:
Ms Ann Moroney, Access Ireland Refugee Social Integration Project, Dominick Court, 40/41 Dominick Street Lower, Dublin 1.
Tel: (01) 8780589
Email: info@accessireland.ie
Website: www.accessireland.ie

Roma Cultural Mediation:
Cultural Mediation can bridge the gap between the culture of the person and the needs of the healthcare provider, which will ultimately lead to more satisfactory outcomes for both parties. The Roma Cultural Mediation Project was initiated and implemented by Access Ireland and partners, including the HSE, under the EU EQUAL 2 Community Initiative. The Project is continuing under the auspices of Access Ireland, who co-ordinate and support the work of a team of Roma cultural mediators that were trained under the initiative.

Contributors

• Ms. Sara Russell, Roma Community Development Worker, Pavee Point, coordinated and participated in a meeting between Bridget McGuane, who compiled the Guide, and a group of Roma women. The women had migrated from different countries and followed diverse Christian traditions. Ms Russell reviewed the finalised section with the group of Roma women and approved its content.

• We held a joint interview with Ms Florica Muntean, Cultural Mediator trained under the Roma Cultural Mediation Project, and Ms Mayte Calvo Martin, Coordinator of this project. Ms. Martin facilitated the holding of the interview and provided documented information on the Roma. Ms Muntean, in her continuing role as a Cultural Mediator, reviewed and approved the finalised section.