Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak in the late 1400s in the Punjab district, an area now spanning parts of India and Pakistan. The Sikh holy book is called the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and it is a collection of teachings and writings by former Sikh Gurus as well as some inclusion from Hindu and Muslim saints. Sikhism believes in One God (*Ek Onkar*), Karma, which in simplified form is the future consequences of current actions, the potential for rebirth, leading a strict and moral life, justice, equality and service to humanity.

The Guru lineage has been discontinued and a democratic structure and the Holy Scriptures now Guide the faith.

There are an estimated 23 million Sikhs in the world, most living in Punjab, New Delhi, and other main cities of India. There are also Sikhs in many other countries.

The **Khanda**, composed of four images, is the universal Sikh symbol. In the centre is a double-edged sword called a Khand, surrounded by the Chakar (circle) and at the outer part two curved interlocking swords. Each aspect reflects ideals of the Sikh faith.
Profile of Sikhism in Ireland:
There are approximately 2,000 Sikhs in Ireland, who are primarily of Punjabi descent.

Religious contacts:
There are no clergy in Sikhism. The names of two community elders who are willing to be available to Sikhs who need assistance are given at the end of the section.

Ablution and washing:
The bed-bound may request water for ablutions before prayer, before eating and possibly after using the toilet.

Food and the content of medicine:
Food preferences need to be clarified and discussed with the person as there are dietary restrictions. Where possible, medicines and treatment offered to Sikhs should not include narcotics, intoxicating drugs or alcohol.

Gender issues and modesty:
Women may prefer to be examined by female healthcare staff, and both men and women may prefer to be as covered as possible during a physical examination.

Death-related religious rituals:
The family/community will lead religious services at the bedside.

Cleaning and touching the body:
Consult the family regarding the washing of the body. If the healthcare setting is conducting the wash procedure:

- Females should wash female body and males a male body.
- Follow the guidelines in Essential Practice Point 8 regarding the 5 Ks. All of these items must be left on the body during washing.

Personal and religious items:
The Sikh dress code includes specific items, known as the 5 Ks. None of these should be removed or altered at any time unless required, and then only after consultation with and consent from the person or a family member. This applies to children as well as adults.

- Kesh (uncut hair) covered with a turban that is regarded as part of the person and not a garment.
- Kanga (wooden comb) worn in the hair.
- Kaach (undershorts) worn at all times and replaced as quickly as possible if removed.
- Kara (iron bracelet) worn on the wrist.
- Kirpan (strapped miniature sword) worn around the waist strapped with a strip of cloth called a gatra.

Foetal, infant and child death:
Developed foetuses, infants and children receive a full funeral in accordance with Sikh tradition. Wrap the body of the child in a clean white cloth and give it to the parents for interment.
Memento of deceased child:
Do not offer the family a lock of hair from their deceased child.
Profile of Sikhism in Ireland

Sikhs have been living in Ireland since the 1970s.

Essential Practice Point

Contributors indicate that there are approximately 2,000 Sikhs in Ireland, who are primarily of Punjabi descent and have migrated to Ireland mainly from the Punjab region, India, Malaysia and South Africa.

The main membership lives in the Dublin area and there are also communities in other areas including Cork, Clare, Limerick, Sligo and Roscommon. The sole Gurdwara (place of worship) in the Irish State is in Dublin and others worship in private spaces.

Care of the ill

Beliefs about the treatment of illness

Sikhs emphasise personal conduct and responsibility and are likely to seek and follow medical advice.

Religious contacts and religious practices

Essential Practice Point

• There are no clergy in Sikhism. The names of two community elders who are willing to be available to Sikhs who need assistance are given at the end of the section.

• The Khalsa Brotherhood is the name of the collective of Sikhs who are initiated into the religion through a baptism ceremony, involving the drinking of amrit (holy water). Initiation takes place at an age that the person can understand the significance of the ceremony.

• Baptised Sikhs (see Initiation ritual) wear a specific dress code, known as the 5 Ks, as part of religious observance. The 5Ks are detailed in Essential Practice Point 8 and need to be respected in all treatments in healthcare settings.

Ablution and washing

Essential Practice Point

• Sikhs may wish to wash the hands before the three daily prayers (dawn, evening and before sleep). A bed-bound person may request water for this purpose.

• Washing the hands before eating and washing after toileting are also common practice in the culture of the Punjab. In the West Sikhs generally use toilet paper after using the toilet. Some may wish to also wash. Wet tissues or disposable cups can be made available for this purpose.

Food and the content of medicine

Essential Practice Point

• There are some dietary restrictions, including ritually prepared meat (e.g. halal and kosher). Most Sikhs are unlikely to eat beef or pork. Some do not consume products such as meat, fish, eggs or dairy products. Food preferences need to be clarified and discussed with the person.
Where possible, medicines and treatment offered to Sikhs should not include narcotics, intoxicating drugs or alcohol. Sikhs avoid the use of these substances in their code of conduct. If no alternative is available the person can use these.

Products, for example morphine, can be taken in order to enhance life. It is prudent to discuss the content of medication with the person or family if necessary.

**Gender issues and modesty**

**Essential Practice Point**

- Sikhs tend to adhere to traditional gender and modesty common among people of Asian origin.
- Women may prefer to be examined by female healthcare staff; where this is not possible a female member of staff should be present.
- Both men and women may prefer to be as covered as possible during a physical examination and may prefer a physical examination to be as private as possible.

**Blood Transfusion and Organ Transplantation**

There are no religious objections to blood transfusion or organ transplantation once family consent is received.

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**Care of the Dying**

**Family and community visits**

If a Sikh knows they are about to die they will want to see as many of their friends and family as possible.

**Death-related religious rituals**

**Essential Practice Point**

- The family/community may wish to say prayers and recite hymns, especially if the person is too weak to recite. Some may bring holy Water (Amrit) and blessed food (Prashad) with them to comfort their loved one.
- Sikhs prefer that light is left on in a room until the body leaves it.
- Traditionally the deceased is viewed by the family before interment.

**Cleaning and touching the body**

**Essential Practice Point**

- Most Sikhs are satisfied that the healthcare setting conducts the wash procedure. Some families may wish to wash and lay out the body themselves either at home or in the hospital mortuary. Consultation is necessary to discern the preference.
- If the healthcare setting is conducting the wash procedure:
  - Females should wash female body and males a male body.
• Observe the guidelines regarding the five Ks under the point Personal and Religious Items. All of these items are left on the body during washing, the funeral process and at cremation.

Postmortem requirements

There is no religious objection to postmortems. If it is necessary to cut the hair the family need to be informed and consent sought.

Interment ritual

Sikhs are usually cremated and the ashes scattered in flowing waters. Older Sikhs who have died in Ireland have had their ashes returned to the family homeland for the traditional ceremony while others have had the ashes scattered in waters here.

Bereavement

Following a funeral, prayers are continued, usually at the Gurdwara. Traditionally the family observe a mourning period.

Religious Icons and Symbols

Personal and religious items

Baptised Sikhs wear 5 symbols known as panj kakaars (termed the 5 Ks as each starts with the letter K) that are considered sacred gifts from the Guru. Each object reminds the person of an aspect of their heritage and the code of honour that they live by. Each K is explained and guidance given on how it should be treated.

Essential Practice Point

None of the 5 Ks should be removed or altered at any time unless required and then only after consultation with and consent from the person or a family member. This applies to children and babies as well as adults.

• Kesh (uncut hair): All hair, head, facial and body hair is uncut throughout life. Men cover the head with a turban that is regarded as part of the person and not a garment. Women may wear a turban or scarf. In no circumstance should the hair be cut, at any time, without permission from the person or family. Where it is cut with permission the person or family should also be asked if they wish to have it returned to them for disposal. The person must be asked to remove their own turban if it is necessary to remove it for examinations, etc.

• Kanga (wooden comb): The semi-circular wooden comb is worn in the hair and used for combing the hair. The person needs to be asked to remove the Kanga themselves and store it where they wish.

• Kaach (undershorts): Sikhs wear these specially patterned and stitched undershorts at all times. The person must be requested to remove the Kaach themselves and will normally wish to replace a removed Kaach as quickly as possible.

• Kara (iron bracelet): The iron bracelet is worn on the wrist. The person needs to be asked to remove the Kara themselves for X-ray and similar treatments and store it where they wish.

• Kirpan (strapped sword): A miniature sword is worn around the waist strapped with a strip of cloth called a gatra. The person needs to be asked to remove the Kirpan themselves for examination and treatment and store it where they wish.

Sikhs are regarded as a tolerant and flexible group who are willing to adjust or remove a K if required following information and consultation; recent developments in airport security have rendered it
necessary for many to make such adjustments as a normal part of living.

**Use of religious symbols**

Sikhs do not subscribe to religious icons. It is not appropriate to display icons of other religions in the mortuary area when a Sikh family is using it.

**Additional Notes on Maternity and Paediatric Care**

**Initiation ritual**

Initiation into Sikhism, through a baptism ceremony, takes place at an age that the person can understand the significance of the ceremony. The ceremony involves the drinking of amrit (holy water). An infant in danger of death will not require religious initiation.

**Foetal, infant and child death**

- Traditionally there is no ritual for foetuses miscarried in the early stages of pregnancy. If in doubt check with the contacts below.

**Memento of deceased child**

**Essential Practice Point**

A Sikh must not have their hair cut; therefore, do not offer the family a lock of hair from their deceased child. Usually no memento is necessary.

**Naming convention**

- Sikhs normally source the name of the child from the holy book at the Gurdwara and hence there will be a delay in naming a child.
- Females are always given a middle name Kaur (Princess) and males the middle name Singh (Lion).

**Developing a Sikh Contact**

The sole Sikh public place of worship in Ireland is based in Dublin and can be contacted at:
Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, 78 Serpentine Avenue, Sandymount, Dublin 4.
Tel: (01) 6671558

If the Gurdwara is not contactable, the following Sikh elders are available to respond to queries from healthcare settings and facilitate arrangements for Sikh members.
Dr Jasbir Singh Puri @ 086 2465919
Mr Gurbir Singh Chadha @ 086 8239947

**Contributor**

Dr Jasbir Singh Puri, Trustee Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, provided information and guidance for this section, and approved the finalised content. Dr Puri also provided us with (unpublished) written material that he had developed for the purposes of assisting others to understand the Sikh religion.