In medicine, the medical staff must make certain that the dietary concerns of the patient are being met, thus, allowing the body to be properly nourished and continue to heal. Patients who do not consume their meals become of great concern. In the mind of a care giver it should evoke several questions; is there a physiological basis for their appetite loss? Is the food terrible? Is the patient depressed or anxious? Is the patient acquiring food from a family member or friend? In such instances, one cannot forget the impact that cultural beliefs and traditions may impose to the diet of a patient. Knowledge of cultural differences is important in terms of patient contentment and health. This issue of Cultural Medicine will focus on just a few beliefs encountered in the Middle East.

Atif Hussein, the thirty-year-old son of a Saudi oil prince, refused to eat the food on his meal tray. Throughout the night, however, he would request that the nurses bring him fruit and vegetables. The staff was becoming annoyed of these eating patterns, until they learned that it was the month of Ramadan, an important Muslim religious period. Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the holy month of fasting for adult Muslims. According to the Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Islam, God requires believers to fast during Ramadan so that they “may cultivate piety.” Fasting is also intended to promote self-discipline and spiritual awareness, while helping believers overcome faults such as selfishness and greed. The month of Ramadan is particularly sacred to Muslims because the Qur’an was first revealed to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, during this month. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, the essential religious duties of all adult Muslims. These pillars are described in the Qur’an. Fasting, according to the Qur’an, begins each morning when “the white thread can be distinguished from the black thread of dawn.” It continues until sunset. Fasting consists of abstinence not only from food and drink, but also from smoking and sexual relations. In addition, Muslims take special care to refrain from negative actions such as gossiping and fighting during this period. All Muslims who have reached puberty and who are mentally and physically able to sustain fasting are obliged to fast during Ramadan. People who are sick or traveling, and pregnant or nursing women, are exempt from fasting, but they must later make up any missed days upon recovery or return, or after weaning.

Women who are menstruating or bleeding after childbirth are not allowed to fast, but they too must make up missed days. The elderly and incurably sick need not fast, but they are expected to feed one poor person for every day of fasting they miss.

A festival called Eid al-Fitr (Feast of Fast-Breaking) marks the end of Ramadan. It begins with the sighting of the new crescent moon on the first day of Shawwal, the tenth month in the Islamic calendar, and generally lasts for three days. (next page)
Common Practices of the Middle East, continued...

Muslims take part in communal prayers, either in a mosque or an open space outside the city, and everyone must offer charity to the poor. The celebration has an important social dimension as well. Cities and villages take on a festive look, and people put on new clothes. Friends, relatives, and neighbors meet in mosques and on streets, or visit one another, exchanging congratulations and embracing each other.

A Restriction to Hot and Cold

Here is an example when non-religious food restrictions can also create dietary issues. Samina Abdula, a eighty-one-year old Pakistani female, was hospitalized with lobar pneumonia. Her nurse, Jasmine notices that Mrs. Abdula’s appetite was inadequate and she became alarmed. Jasmine made efforts to nourish her patient with adequate protein by way of nutrient trays with meat, potatoes and gravy.

Yet Mrs. Abdula was non-compliant, only eating jello and a few fruits. When Mrs. Abdula’s son, Anwar arrived at the hospital, he provided information to the nursing staff which help resolve his mom’s dietary issues. Jasmine had been trying to feed Mrs. Abdula foods that Pakistanis normally avoid during the summer months. To many Pakistanis, foods are considered hot or cold.

Thanksgiving, A Brief History

At a time of great religious strife and persecution in England, a group of protestant Christians known as the Puritans decided to flee from Great Britain. They desired to establish a colony in North America where they could practice their beliefs without fear of persecution. Therefore, in 1621, this group embarked on a ship called The Mayflower to voyage across the Atlantic Ocean and establish a colony in northern Virginia. They arrived in North America successfully; however, instead of landing on the shore of Virginia they reached the coast of modern day Massachusetts. Here they established Plymouth, the second British colony in the Americas after Jamestown, Virginia.

The early colonies faced great challenges, however, because of harsh climates, hostile natives, and ill-prepared settlers such as exemplified by Jamestown in which less than one-tenth of the original number of settlers survived. Eventually these settlers signed treaties and traded with peaceful Native American tribes such as the Wampanoag of Massachusetts. The colonists also received essential and generous aid indeed from such friendly indigenous peoples. In celebration of their surviving the first harsh experiences, many colonies started having annual feasts known as Thanksgiving. The most famous story of the first Puritan Thanksgiving describes the first three-day feast that the Puritans of Plymouth had in the company of the nearby Wampanoag chief Massasoit and his tribe, as well as the two famous English-speaking natives Squanto and Samoset who befriended the settlers early on and provided them considerable help. This meal consisted most likely of lobster, goose, turkey, fricassee, pudding, cod, duck, pumpkin, venison, and cheese according to historical research. No official record of the first Thanksgiving still exists, but the oldest known Thanksgiving proclamation still in existence was declared for June 29th, 1676 by the Charlestown colony in Massachusetts. The Thanksgiving date has changed several times: The first was set in a 1782 proclamation by the Continental Congress that set the date to November 28th, followed by President George Washington’s proclamation in 1789 for November 26th, then President Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 proclamation for the last Thursday in November. Every following President thereafter decided the date on a yearly basis until Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President in 1933. Following considerable controversy during his term, congress passed a law in 1941 setting the fourth Thursday of every November as Thanksgiving, which has been the date ever since.