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Sometimes, it's culturally inappropriate to tell patients they soon will die.

Film shows medicine's cultural cross-ups

By Lisa Fernandez
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Mohammad Kochi, a 59-year-old Afghan refugee in Fremont, was dying of gastric cancer.

His oncologist urged chemotherapy. But, as a practicing Muslim, Kochi rejected the procedure in the mistaken belief that it would interfere with his daily prayers. He flew to Mecca, where he prayed to Allah to heal him.

Back home, confusion abounded. Kochi's family was frustrated with his medical care, thinking a wealthy, English-speaking family would get better treatment. His Stanford doctors worried that Kochi's family was not accurately communicating how serious his disease was.

Kochi died in 2001. "Hold Your Breath," a one-hour documentary of his complicated cross-cultural story, premieres today at 5 p.m. at the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital auditorium.

The filmmaker, Maren Grainger-Monsen, was trained as an emergency room doctor and has been a documentarian for the past 15 years. She is the director of Stanford University

School of Medicine's Bioethics in Film Program.

Her film grew out of a larger film called "Worlds Apart." That documentary tracks Kochi's miscommunications in doctor's offices along with three other patients, who are Laotian, African-American and Puerto Rican. That film is being used in 37 medical schools, 90 residency programs and 139 colleges and universities.

It took Grainger-Monsen one year to find the patients and two years to film the four stories.

"I witnessed this miscommunication right before my very eyes," Grainger-Monsen said. "Cultural miscommunication in the medical world has not been very well understood."

Her firsthand experience prompted her to make several recommendations. The most important, as she sees it, is that trained interpreters should be hired to negotiate between the patient and doctor. While family members may be well-intentioned, they can keep things secret from relatives if they don't want to hurt their feelings. Sometimes, it's culturally inappropriate to tell patients they soon will die.

In the film, one of Kochi's friends said: "In Afghan cul-

ture, the doctor doesn't speak directly to the patient and say you will die in two to three months. Instead the doctor speaks only to the family and tells them in a way so subtle, they barely understand."

Kochi never was told he was dying; he only overheard the news indirectly.

The film also shows how Kochi's relationship with his daughter becomes complicated.

She becomes his medical interpreter and rises to power, communicating with the doctors, at times mostly in English. In effect, this left her father in the dark about his medical situation.

Grainger-Monsen also recommends more "cultural brokers" in hospitals. These are religious or community leaders who could serve much like a chaplain or imam, helping to interpret medical lingo and cultural nuances. And she believes that medical staff members should be required to take lessons in cultural competency.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The free film will air today at 5 p.m. at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Auditorium, 725 Welch Road, in Palo Alto.

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