

# **A Guide To Sikhism: Key Issues In Healthcare Practice**

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## **Abstract**

Sikhism was founded in the Punjab by Guru Nanak in the 15th Century CE and is a monotheistic religion. Sikhs think religion should be practised by living in the world and coping with life's everyday problems. In the UK, there are approximately 700,000 to 1 million Sikhs in the UK according to official figures. This is made up of first generation migrants who arrived in the UK in the 1960's and 1970's and from East Africa during the early part of the 1970's. The first part gives an introduction to the faith, its beliefs and practices. The second part discusses the faith and specific issues that arise in healthcare settings and presents the research findings of the yearly survey conducted by the UK Sikh Healthcare chaplaincy group into patient care.



UK Sikh Healthcare Chaplaincy Group

## The Sikh faith: principles and beliefs

### Introduction

There are 20 million Sikhs in the world, most of who live in the Punjab province of India. Sikhism was **founded** in the 16th century in the Punjab district of what is now India and Pakistan. It was founded by **Guru Nanak** and is based on his teachings, and those of the 9 Sikh gurus who followed him. The most important thing in Sikhism is the internal religious state of the individual.

- Sikhism is a **monotheistic religion**
- Sikhism stresses the importance of doing good actions rather than merely carrying out rituals
- Sikhs believe that the way to lead a good life is to:
  - keep God in heart and mind at all times
  - live honestly and work hard
  - treat everyone equally
  - be generous to the less fortunate
  - serve others
- The Sikh place of worship is called a **Gurdwara**

The Sikh scripture is the Guru Granth Sahib, a scripture that Sikhs consider a living Guru. The **tenth Sikh Guru** decreed that after his death the spiritual guide of the Sikhs would be the teachings contained in these scriptures, so the Guru Granth Sahib now has the status of a Guru, and Sikhs show it the respect they would give to a human Guru. The community of men and women who have been initiated into the Sikh faith is the **Khalsa**. The Khalsa celebrated its 300th anniversary in 1999. Guru Gobind Singh decreed that where Sikhs could not find answers in the Guru Granth Sahib, they should decide issues as a community, based on the principles of their scripture.

### Sikh Beliefs

#### Living in God and community

Sikhs focus their lives around their relationship with God, and being a part of the Sikh community. The Sikh ideal combines action and belief. To live a good life a person should do good deeds as well as meditating on God.

### **God and the cycle of life**

Sikhs believe that human beings spend their time in a cycle of birth, life, and rebirth. They share this belief with followers of other Indian religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The quality of each particular life depends on the law of Karma. Karma sets the quality of a life according to how well or badly a person behaved in their previous life. The only way out of this cycle, which all faiths regard as painful, is to achieve a total knowledge of and union with God.

### **The God of grace**

Sikh spirituality is centred round this need to understand and experience God, and eventually become one with God. To do this a person must switch the focus of their attention from themselves to God. They get this state, which is called mukti (liberation), through the grace of God. That means it's something God does to human beings, and not something that human beings can earn. However, God shows people through holy books, and by the examples of saints, the best ways to get close to him. Sikhs believe that God can't be understood properly by human beings, but he can be experienced through love, worship, and contemplation. Sikhs look for God both inside themselves and in the world around them. They do this to help themselves achieve liberation and union with God.

### **Getting close to God**

When a Sikh wants to see God, they look both at the created world and into their own heart and soul. Their aim is to see the divine order that God has given to everything, and through it to understand the nature of God. Most human beings can't see the true reality of God because they are blinded by their own self-centred pride (Sikhs call it haumain) and concern for physical things.

### **God inside us**

Sikhs believe that God is inside every person, no matter how wicked they appear, and so everyone is capable of change.

### **God beyond ourselves**

Sikhs believe that God's message can be found in several ways outside ourselves.

- The message is written in the whole of creation; look at it with open eyes and see the truth of God, for creation is the visible message of God.
- Sikhs believe that most of us misunderstand the universe. We think that it exists on its own, when it really exists because God wills it to exist, and is a portrait of God's own nature.
- The message has been shown to us by the Gurus in their lives and in their words.
- The message is set down in the teachings of scripture.

### **Living a good life in this world**

Sikhs don't think it pleases God if people pay no attention to others and simply devote themselves slavishly to religion. Sikhism doesn't ask people to turn away from ordinary life to get closer to God. In fact it demands that they use ordinary life as a way to get closer to God.

A Sikh serves God by serving (seva) other people every day. By devoting their lives to service they get rid of their own ego and pride. Many Sikhs carry out chores in the Gurdwara as their service to the community. These range from working in the kitchen to cleaning the floor. The Langar, or free food kitchen, is a community act of service. Sikhs also regard caring for the poor or sick as an important duty of service.

### **The three duties**

The three duties that a Sikh must carry out can be summed up in three words; **Pray, Work, Give.**

**Nam japna:** Keeping God in mind at all times.

**Kirt Karna:** Earning an honest living. Since God is truth, a Sikh seeks to live honestly. This doesn't just mean avoiding crime; Sikhs avoid gambling, begging, or working in the alcohol or tobacco industries.

**Vand Chhakna:** (Literally, sharing one's earnings with others) Giving to charity and caring for others.

### **The five vices**

Sikhs try to avoid the five vices that make people self-centred, and build barriers against God in their lives.

- Lust
- Covetousness and greed
- Attachment to things of this world
- Anger
- Pride

If a person can overcome these vices they are on the road to liberation.

## **Customs**

### **Khalsa initiation**

The 5 Ks date from the **creation of the Khalsa Panth** by **Guru Gobind Singh** in 1699. The Guru introduced them for several reasons:

- Adopting these common symbols would identify members of the Khalsa
- Because all members of the Khalsa wear the 5 Ks the members of the community are more strongly bound together
- Each K has a particular significance

### **The meaning of the 5 Ks**

The 5 Ks taken together symbolise that the Sikh who wears them has dedicated themselves to a life of devotion and submission to the Guru.

The 5 Ks are 5 physical symbols worn by Sikhs who have been initiated into the Khalsa. The five Ks are:

- Kesh (uncut hair)
- Kara (a steel bracelet)
- Kanga (a wooden comb)
- Kaccha - also spelt, Kachh, Kachera (cotton underwear)
- Kirpan (steel sword)

### **Kesh - uncut hair**

Various reasons and symbolisms have been put forward for the Sikh practice of keeping hair uncut.

- Throughout history hair (kesh) has been regarded as a symbol both of holiness and strength.
- One's hair is part of God's creation. Keeping hair uncut indicates that one is willing to accept God's gift as God intended it.

- Uncut hair symbolizes adoption of a simple life, and denial of pride in one's appearance.
- Not cutting one's hair is a symbol of one's wish to move beyond concerns of the body and attain spiritual maturity.
- A Sikh should only bow his head to the Guru, and not to a barber.
- It is a highly visible symbol of membership of the group.
- It follows the appearance of Guru Gobind Singh, founder of the Khalsa. Sikh women are just as forbidden to cut any body hair or even trim their eyebrows, as Sikh men are forbidden to trim their beards.

### **Kara - a steel bracelet**

- A symbol of restraint and gentility.
- A symbol that a Sikh is linked to the Guru.
- It acts as a reminder that a Sikh should not do anything of which the Guru would not approve.
- A symbol of God having no beginning or end.
- A symbol of permanent bonding to the community-being a link in the chain of Khalsa Sikhs (the word for link is 'kari').
- The Kara is made of steel, rather than gold or silver, because it is not an ornament.

### **Kanga - a wooden comb**

This symbolises a clean mind and body; since it keeps the uncut hair neat and tidy. It symbolises the importance of looking after the body which God has created. This does not conflict with the Sikh's aim to move beyond bodily concerns; since the body is one's vehicle for enlightenment one should care for it appropriately.

### **Kachha - special underwear**

This is a pair of breeches that must not come below the knee. It was a particularly useful garment for Sikh warriors of the 18th and 19th centuries, being very suitable for warfare when riding a horse. It's a symbol of chastity.

### **Kirpan - a ceremonial sword**

There is no fixed style of Kirpan and it can be anything from a few inches to three feet long. It is kept in a sheath and can be worn over or under clothing.

The Kirpan can symbolise:

- Spirituality
- The soldier part of the Soldier-Saints
- Defence of good
- Defence of the weak
- The struggle against injustice
- A metaphor for God

For a Sikh the fact that the Guru has instructed the Sikhs to wear the 5 Ks is an entirely sufficient reason, and no more need be said. The symbols have become greatly more powerful with each passing year of Sikh history. Every Sikh remembers that every Sikh warrior, saint, or martyr since 1699, and every living member of the Khalsa, is united with them in having adopted the same 5 Ks.

### **Sikh calendar**

The Sikh calendar is called the Nanakshahi Calendar and takes its name from **Guru Nanak**, who founded Sikhism. For most of its history Sikhism has used the traditional Vikrami (or Bikrami) calendar, shared by Sikhs and **Hindus** in North India, to set the date of its festivals. The Nanakshahi Calendar was adopted in 2003 and made life much easier for Sikhs as their holy days no longer move about the calendar from year to year. **Gurpurbs** (celebrations devoted to particular Gurus) now always happen on the same date, and occur once (and once only) in every year.

The calendar didn't fix the date of all Sikh festivals. Those Sikh festivals that are celebrated at the same time as similar Hindu religious events, such as **Diwali** and **Hola Mohalla**, still have their dates set by the Vikrami calendar. The Nanakshahi Calendar was developed by a Canadian Sikh, Pal Singh Purewal, retired computer engineer. He started work on the calendar in the 1960s. Purewal believed that having a unique calendar was vital for the integrity of the Sikh religion.

### **The Nanakshahi calendar in brief**

- a solar calendar
- called Nanakshahi after Guru Nanak (founder of Sikhism)
- year one is the year of Guru Nanak's birth (1469 CE)
- uses most of the mechanics of the Western calendar

- year length is same as Western calendar (365 days 5 hours 48 minutes 45 seconds)
- contains 5 months of 31 days followed by 7 months of 30 days
- leap year every 4 years in which the last month (Phagun) has an extra day

## Holy Days

### Diwali

Diwali, the Festival of Light, comes at the end of October or early November. It's a festival that Sikhs, **Hindus** and **Jains** celebrate. For Sikhs, Diwali is particularly important because it celebrates the release from prison of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, and 52 other princes with him, in 1619. The Sikh tradition holds that the Emperor Jahangir had imprisoned Guru Hargobind and 52 princes. The Emperor was asked to release Guru Hargobind which he agreed to do. However, Guru Hargobind asked that the princes be released also. The Emperor agreed, but said only those who could hold onto his cloak tail would be allowed to leave the prison. This was in order to limit the number of prisoners who could leave. However, Guru Hargobind had a cloak made with 52 pieces of string and so each prince was able to hold onto one string and leave prison. Sikhs celebrated the return of Guru Hargobind by lighting the Golden Temple and this tradition continues today.

### Hola Mahalla

Hola Mahalla begins on the first day of the lunar month of Chet in the Nanakshahi calendar and follows the Hindu festival of colours, **Holi**. **Guru Gobind Singh** started this festival as a day for Sikhs to practise their military exercises and hold mock battles. Today, Sikhs celebrate by watching and partaking in martial arts parades, led by the nishan sahibs of the **Gurdwaras**. These are followed by poetry readings and music.

### Gurpurbs

Gurpurbs are festivals that are associated with the lives of the Gurus. They are happy occasions which are celebrated most enthusiastically by Sikhs.



The most important Gurpurbs are:

- The birthday of **Guru Nanak**, founder of Sikhism (April or November)
- The birthday of **Guru Gobind Singh**, founder of the Khalsa (January)
- The martyrdom of **Guru Arjan** (June)
- The martyrdom of **Guru Tegh Bahadur** (November/December)

Sikhs celebrate Gurpurbs with an *akhand path*. This is a complete and continuous reading of Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib that takes 48 hours and finishes on the day of the festival. This is also performed in times of ceremony such as birth, death, marriage and moving into a new home. The reading is done by a team of readers, who may be professionals or family members (in the case of family rites). Each reads for two to three hours.

The Akhand Path originated in India in the mid-18th century, when there were few copies of the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs were at war and hid in the jungles. They gathered round to hear readings from the sacred text before the text was moved on to be read to other groups of Sikhs. **Gurdwaras** are decorated with flowers, flags and lights, and Sikhs dress up in new or smart clothes and join together for special services. Hymns are sung from the Guru Granth Sahib, poems are recited in praise of the Gurus and there are lectures on Sikhism.

In India and parts of Britain, there are processions where the Sikh Scripture is paraded around. Five people representing the first five members of the **Khalsa** (the Panj Piaras or Five Beloved Ones) head the procession carrying the Sikh flag. Musicians, singers and martial artists follow. Outside some Gurdwaras, free sweets are offered to the general public, regardless of their faith. Food is important in this festival. Sikhs come together to eat special food such as Karah Parasaad, a sweet-tasting food which has been blessed and is served warm. Free meals (*langars*) are served at the Gurdwaras.

## Vaisakhi

Vaisakhi, also spelled Baisakhi, is one of the most important dates in the Sikh calendar. It is the Sikh New Year festival and is celebrated on April 13 or 14. It also commemorates 1699, the year Sikhism was born as a collective faith.

## History

Vaisakhi is a long established harvest festival in the Punjab. It had been celebrated long before it gained an added dimension for Sikhs. In 1699 the tenth guru, **Guru Gobind Singh**, chose Vaisakhi as the occasion to transform the Sikhs into a family of soldier saints, known as the Khalsa Panth. Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa in front of thousands at Anandpur Sahib.

During the Vaisakhi festival Guru Gobind Singh came out of a tent carrying a sword. He challenged any Sikh who was prepared to give his life to come into the tent. The Guru returned alone with his sword covered in blood. He then requested another volunteer and repeated the same action four times until five men disappeared into the tent. The crowd was very concerned until they saw five men return wearing turbans with the Guru.

These five men became known as the *Panj Piare*, or 'Beloved Five'. The men were then baptised into the Khalsa by the Guru. He sprinkled them with *Amrit* ('immortalising nectar': the Sikh term for holy water) and said prayers. This is the basis of the **Sikh baptism ceremony**.

## Celebrations

Vaisakhi is celebrated in much the same way as **Gurpurbs**. **Gurdwaras** are decorated and visited. Parades, dancing and singing happen throughout the day. Many Sikhs choose to be baptised into the Khalsa brotherhood on this day.

## Nagar Kirtans

The festival is marked with *nagar kirtan* processions: processions through the streets (*nagar* means "town") which form an important part of Sikh culture and religious celebrations.

*Kirtan* is a term meaning the singing of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. Celebrations always include music, singing and chanting scriptures and hymns.

The processions are led by traditionally dressed Panj Piaras. The Guru Granth Sahib will be carried in the procession in a place of honour.

# Sikh History

## Origins of Sikhism

Sikhism was born in the Punjab area of South Asia, which now falls into the present day states of India and Pakistan. The main religions of the area at the time were Hinduism and Islam. The Sikh faith began around 1500 CE, when **Guru Nanak** began teaching a faith that was quite distinct from Hinduism and Islam. Nine Gurus followed Nanak and developed the Sikh faith and community over the next centuries.

## Militarisation of the Sikhs

Sikhism was well established by the time of **Guru Arjan**, the fifth Guru. Guru Arjan completed the establishment of Amritsar as the capital of the Sikh world, and compiled the first authorised book of Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*.

However, during Arjan's time Sikhism was seen as a threat by the state and Guru Arjan was eventually executed for his faith in 1606. The sixth Guru, Hargobind, started to militarise the community so that they would be able to resist any oppression. The Sikhs fought a number of battles to preserve their faith. The Sikhs then lived in relative peace with the political rulers until the time of the **Moghal Emperor, Aurangzeb**, who used force to make his subjects accept Islam. Aurangzeb had the ninth Guru, **Tegh Bahadur**, arrested and executed in 1675.

## The Khalsa

The tenth Guru, **Gobind Singh**, recreated the Sikhs as a military group of men and women called the **Khalsa** in 1699, with the intention that the Sikhs should for ever be able to defend their faith. Gobind Singh established the **Sikh rite of initiation** (called *khandey di pahul*) and the **5 Ks** which give Sikhs their unique appearance. Gobind Singh was the last human Guru. Sikhs now treat their scriptures as their Guru.

## After the Gurus

The first military leader of the Sikhs to follow the Gurus was Banda Singh Bahadur. He led a successful campaign against the Moghals until he was captured and executed in 1716. In the middle of the century the Sikhs rose up again, and over the next 50 years took over more and more territory. In 1799 Ranjit Singh captured Lahore, and in 1801 established the Punjab as an independent state, with himself as Maharaja. He proved an adept ruler of a state in which Sikhs were still in a minority. Although a devout Sikh, he took part in religious acts with **Muslims** and **Hindus** as well.

## **Defeated by the British**

After Ranjit Singh died in 1839 the Sikh state crumbled, damaged by vicious internal battles for the leadership. In 1845-6 troops of the British Empire defeated the Sikh armies, and took over much Sikh territory. The Sikhs rebelled again in 1849, and were defeated by the British, this time conclusively.

## **The Sikhs and the British Raj**

After this final battle, the Sikhs and the British discovered they had much in common and built a good relationship. The tradition began of Sikhs serving with great distinction in the British Army. The Sikhs got on well with the British partly because they came to think of themselves less as subjects of the Raj than as partners of the British. The British helped themselves get a favourable religious spin when they took control of the Sikh religious establishment by putting their own choices in control of the Gurdwaras. Good relations between Sikhs and British came to an end in 1919 with the Amritsar massacre.

## **History of Sikhism in Britain**

Most of Britain's Sikhs have their origins in immigration either from the Punjab in Northwest India in the 1950s and 60s, or from East Africa slightly later.

### **The first settler**

The first recorded Sikh settler in Britain was Maharajah Duleep Singh. Duleep Singh was the last ruler of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab. The Maharajah was dethroned after six years' rule, and exiled to Britain in 1849 at the age of 14, after the Anglo-Sikh wars. There is a statue to the Maharajah at Butten Island, Thetford, Norfolk, near the Elveden Estate where he lived in Britain. The statue was unveiled by the Prince of Wales in 1999. Despite the early arrival of the Maharajah, the first Sikh Gurdwara (temple) was not established until 1911, at Putney in London.

### **The main immigration of the Sikhs**

The first Sikh migration came in the 1950s. It was mostly of men from the Punjab seeking work in British industry, which had a shortage of unskilled labour. Most of the new arrivals worked in industries like foundries and textiles. These new arrivals mostly settled in London, Birmingham and West Yorkshire. The first batch of Sikh migrants usually removed the outward religious symbols (turban, hair and beard) as racist prejudice in Britain would have kept them out of work.

## **Why did they leave the Punjab?**

People wanted to leave the Punjab not just because there was a shortage of industrial and agricultural jobs, but also because of the chaotic aftermath of the 1947 division of "British" India into the secular but largely Hindu state of India and the Muslim state of Pakistan. The frontier between India and Pakistan ran through the Sikh homeland of the Punjab. There was bloodshed and destruction as millions of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs tried to cross the border to the safety of their own communities.

The Punjab changed from a settled and prosperous area to a violent and overcrowded frontier zone. Many Sikhs left the area that was to become Pakistan to move to the Indian section of the Punjab, while others left India altogether. The Punjab was disrupted again in 1966, when India further subdivided it into 3 parts, with the creation of the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh.

## **Immigration from East Africa**

The migration from East Africa was the result of the move to Africanise countries like Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, depriving many Asians of their work, and in many cases expelling them altogether. The Sikhs from East Africa took a robust attitude to the **outward symbols of Sikhism** and continued to wear them.

Since they had been living as an expatriate community in Africa for over 70 years they were accustomed to being a highly visible minority. They also had the further advantage of usually being highly skilled and employable, in contrast to the humble labourers from the Punjab. The presence of a group of Sikhs who radiated pride in being members of the **Khalsa** encouraged others to return to the **five Ks**. This strengthened the identity and the visibility of the British Sikhs as a whole.

## **Section 2: Issues arising for members of the Sikh faith in healthcare settings**

### **Introduction**

This section provides a discussion on some of the key issues that arise for Sikh patients in healthcare settings in the UK based on research conducted by the UK Sikh Healthcare chaplaincy group over the past two years. The section is intended to highlight some of the key instances where issues have occurred and to point out common mistakes and issues.

### **Issues with the care and understanding of the five k's**

Approximately 25% of Sikhs in the UK are baptised Sikhs. Our research indicated that for the vast majority of them there was little understanding of the purpose, principles and sanctity that the 5k's have in Sikh life. One key theme was that for many Sikh patients across the country, [therefore including areas where there was already a large proportion of Sikh patients as service users in the hospital] there was little or no understanding of the five k's. The caring for a Sikh patient guide is the UK SHCG's attempt to try to rectify this, however, there is a clear need that the understanding of the 5k's in particular needs to be not just within medical staff but also within support and care workers as well.

Issues arise for instance with the bathing and personal hygiene of patients. Certain instances have occurred where in an attempt to make the patient more presentable, the hair, sacred to a baptised Sikh has been cut. In other cases, during the cleaning of hospital beds, the five k's which may be removed only for bathing, or a patient turban were moved and placed near the floor. The 5k's are treated with upmost respect by Sikhs and such instances cause a great deal of stress to the patients involved.

For some patients, particularly those who are elderly, the issue becomes more acute given that they are unable to communicate the care and customs to staff. This issue arises through the lack of fluency in English, alongside a fear that they should not try and challenge the practice of NHS staff so as to avoid confrontation. Finally, most rely on relatives or family friends to provide the necessary translation service and

communicate needs to staff. Within the over 65 age group, this was deemed to be one of the key issues of concern.

### **Issues with not understanding what a Sikh is**

Our research found that in areas considered not to have a large Sikh population, many Sikhs struggled to explain to hospital staff who they were and that they were not a division of either Islam or Hinduism. This was particularly an issue where the staff was not from the UK and therefore even more likely to not have come into contact with Sikhs. Whilst these issues are addressed through diversity training, there will be instances where in particularly rural settings a member of the Sikh faith may find themselves attending hospital. In the UK, the areas of concern were the North-East, Yorkshire and Humberside, Wales, East Anglia and Cornwall and Devon. The rural areas tended to be the ones in which this occurred more frequently. Whilst a Sikh will not take offence, it does raise issues about the care needs of the patients. In some instances, Sikhs have been given halal meat, which is forbidden in the Sikh faith. This tended to be the most common issue arising from the healthcare staff not realising that the patient is not Muslim but is Sikh.

### **Issues related to the care of prayer books**

Sikhs hold their prayer books with the highest respect. They are not to be left on the ground nor are they to be left when not in use near in places which do not bestow the respect that each Sikh gives to the scriptures. For instance, food or drinks glasses would not be rested on them. They would not be placed near a bin or where clothes are kept such as under garments etc. This is of particular concern as many Sikhs found that within the hospital setting, they could not afford the respect that they required their prayer books to have.

### **Issues related to understanding the extended family system**

Sikhs are a community based religion. They tend to be focused on community care and as such when a member of the community is ill, the response is that the community will come to support them. This involves members not just from the immediate family but also other extended family relatives alongside family friends wanting to visit the patient. In Sikhism, the community spirit tends to afford the same rights and respect to friends and extended relatives as it would to immediate family. Alongside this, age is a determining factor in the hierarchy. Therefore,

elders are considered to be those who are to be given the highest rights of respect and therefore the greatest access to patients. This unique social dynamic is one which many healthcare settings and providers do not understand nor cater for. It tends to cause especially in times of births and deaths a large amount of tension between healthcare staff and patient families.