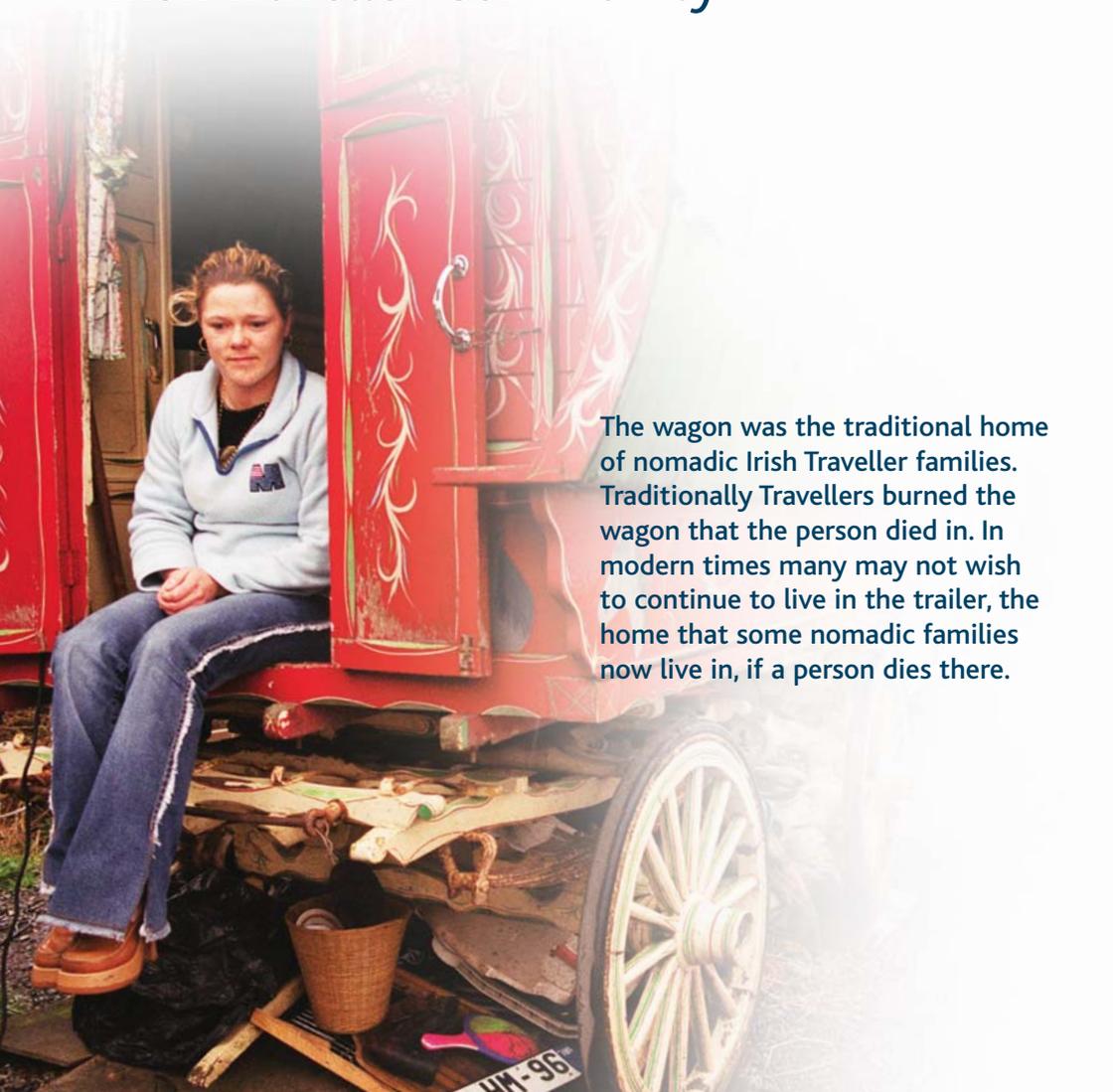


Providing Effective Health Services to Travellers - A Guide

Irish Traveller Community



The wagon was the traditional home of nomadic Irish Traveller families. Traditionally Travellers burned the wagon that the person died in. In modern times many may not wish to continue to live in the trailer, the home that some nomadic families now live in, if a person dies there.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ms Maria Daly, Joint Coordinator of Primary Health Care for Travellers Programme, Pavee Point Travellers Centre, facilitated us to conduct a consultation with a Traveller Women's Group based at Pavee Point. Some of these women are Primary Care Workers and/or leaders in their local communities. Ms Daly and her colleague Ms Fran Keyes reviewed and approved the finalised material.



PROFILE OF THE IRISH TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

- Travellers are an indigenous minority who have been documented as being part of Irish society for centuries. The group has a long shared history, identity, language and value system, which makes them a distinct group.
- While Irish Travellers are native to Ireland, they have much in common with European Travellers and Gypsies. Officially, the Irish Government recognise Travellers as a cultural minority, while the group continues to campaign for ethnic minority status in line with the Roma and other similar groups across Europe.

essential practice point 01:

Travellers also experience discrimination and racism in service provision, largely as a result of inbuilt prejudices and stereotyping.

Discriminatory and racist treatment of Travellers in healthcare provision is unlawful under the provisions of the Equal Status Act 2000 to 2004.

Such experiences also have implications for how many Travellers will present themselves and interact with health services. For these reasons, dignity, respect and non-discrimination need to be part of the approach to Travellers in healthcare settings.

- Traveller representative organisations indicate that there are approximately 35,000 Travellers living in the Irish Republic. It is estimated that there are 1,500 Irish Travellers living in Northern Ireland and 15,000 in England, Scotland and Wales.

GENERAL CULTURAL FEATURES AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

- The Travellers are distinguished by a rich storytelling and musical heritage. Many Irish musicians, for example Christy Moore, openly acknowledge their debt to Traveller musicians who retained the musical heritage of the land.
- The Travellers' experience is one of exclusion from rights and privileges enjoyed by their settled counterparts. For example, Travellers have a higher stillbirth rate, a higher infant mortality rate and a lower life expectancy than the settled population.
- Some features of Traveller 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.

- **Religious devotion and cures:** The vast majority of Travellers are Roman Catholic and they tend to be devout in religious observance. The community retain beliefs about cures to be found in various natural phenomena, discussed below.
- **Extended family:** Extended family is of particular importance, with a strong sense of family loyalty and duty. This point is important for family visits in hospital.
- **Language and literacy:** While the group has a traditional distinct language, called Cant, Travellers use English as a main language in everyday life. However, many Travellers, particularly older group members, may have literacy difficulties. For example Travellers may not be able to read the letter-based reading tests due to literacy and not eyesight issues.
- **Nomadism:** Moving from one place to another is part of the lifestyle of many, though not all, Travellers. At times of the year the population of Travellers increases overall as relatives return from England and the populations of particular towns increase as Travellers migrate.
- **Marriage age, birth rate and social position of women:** Travellers now marry older and have smaller families than was the traditional custom. Unmarried births among Travellers are unusual while there is now a small incidence of this pattern. Traveller women participate in social affairs on an equal footing with men and many have taken on leadership roles in the community.
- **Dress/jewellery:** Traveller dress sense is similar to that of the rest of Irish society. Family will wish to retain any jewellery on the body of a deceased relative.



CARE OF THE ILL

Beliefs about the treatment of illness and Traditional Medicine

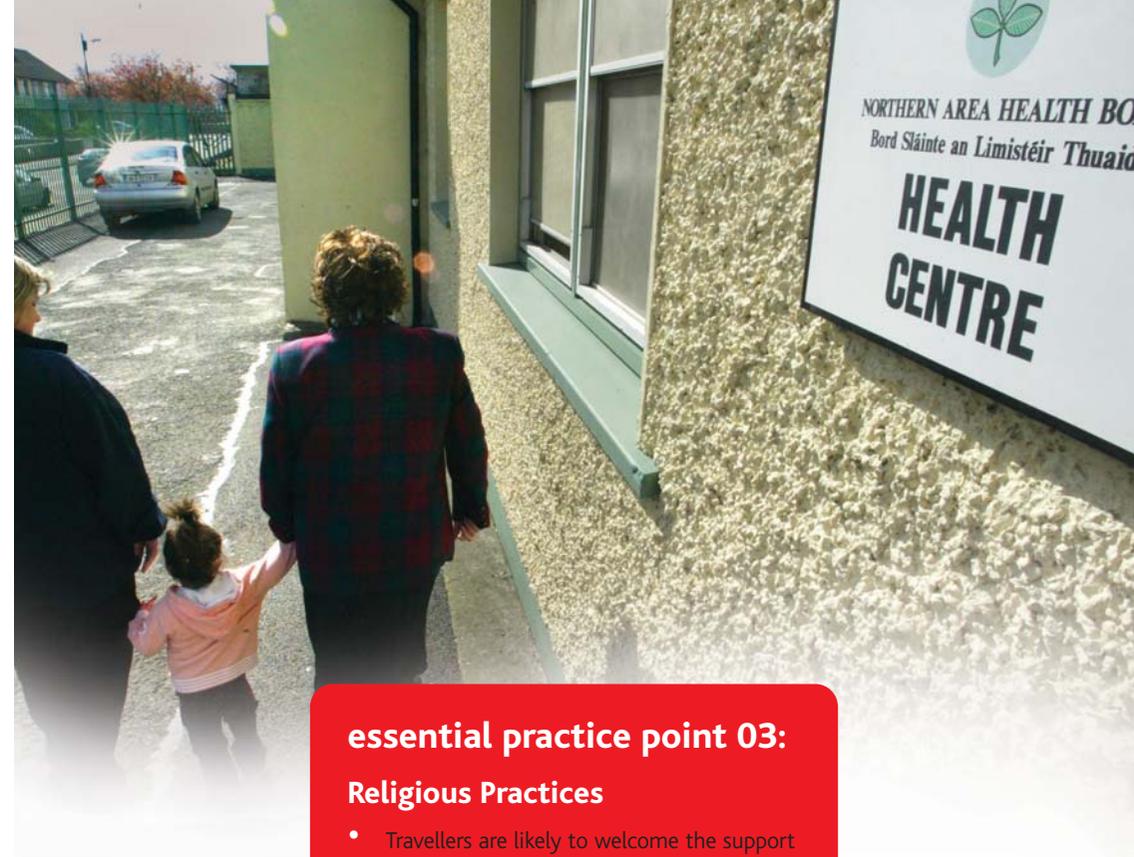
- Situations may arise where traditional healers wish to use hands-on healing and this may conflict with medical requirements that necessitate that a wounded area is not touched. Should this arise, discussion will be needed so that a mutual solution can be found that satisfies a family.

Blood Transfusion and Organ Transplantation

- There are unlikely to be objections to these procedures.
- Consideration needs to be given to literacy issues if documentation is to be signed or consent sought for any of these procedures.

essential practice point 02:

- Many Travellers have strong beliefs about the power of prayer and many wear icons of religious figures and relics of various saints (*see Personal Items for more information*).
- There is a rich heritage of traditional or folk healing practices among Travellers, some of which are similar to practices indicated in the section on Traditional and Ancient Religions. Travellers also hold strong beliefs in the healing power of water taken from holy wells as well as oils/ointments infused with particular herbal remedies prepared by traditional healers.
- Some community members have knowledge of cures for particular conditions, such as thrush, warts, etc. This is given by the healer as a service to others, usually without payment. The healers may be visited by community members who have these ailments. Community members in hospital may have 'cures' sourced from healers for a particular condition.
- Travellers tend to respect medical opinion in addition to retaining their belief in the power of traditional cures and religious practices (detailed below), prayer and relics. It is advised to check if the person is using any traditional remedies in addition to medical prescriptions.



essential practice point 03:

Religious Practices

- Travellers are likely to welcome the support of the Roman Catholic Chaplain who will also administer all necessary religious ceremonies, practices and rituals related to illness and death. Others may also wish to see a priest that they have developed a relationship with over the years.

essential practice point 04:

Treatment Needs

- Due to the literacy issues highlighted above, plain English is necessary in any communication about healthcare issues. Written instructions such as prescriptions need to be explained verbally.

CARE OF THE DYING

Family and community visits

- Some families may wish to bring the deceased home for a traditional wake (ritual surrounding the community viewing of the body in the home).

essential practice point 05:

A critically ill or dying Traveller is likely to have a number of visitors. Traveller representatives have indicated that it is important to ascertain who will represent the family in interactions with hospital staff. This will help in mediating between the needs of the healthcare setting and family visitation needs.

essential practice point 06: Death-related religious rituals

The Catholic chaplain or, if preferred, the person's own priest should be called to administer the customary rituals preceding death.

Cleaning and touching the body

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

Postmortem requirements

- There are unlikely to be culturally specific objections to a postmortem.

Interment ritual

- Travellers usually bury their loved ones and many prefer to be buried in the areas that families lived in and have an affinity with.

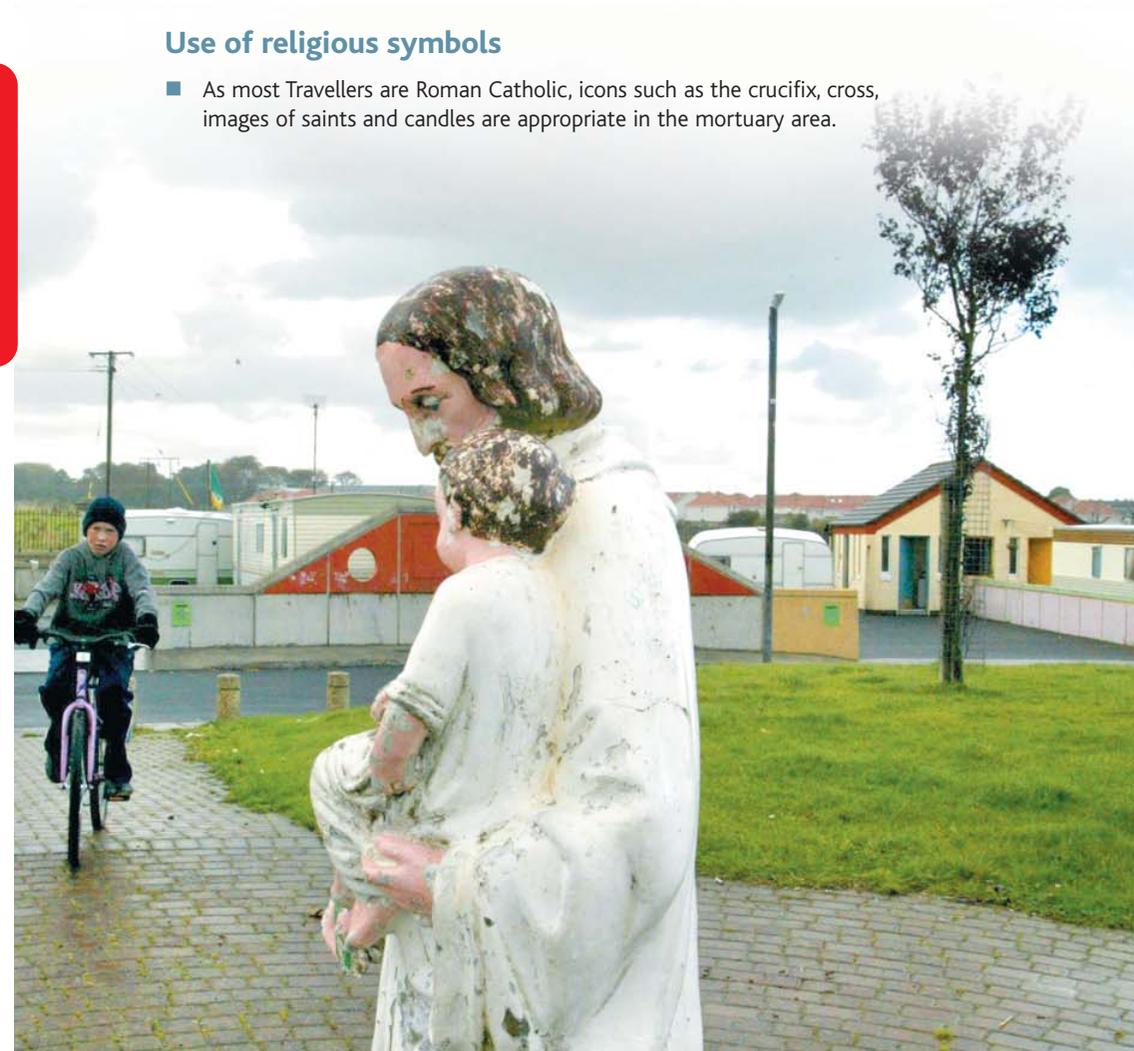
RELIGIOUS ICONS AND SYMBOLS

Personal and religious items

- Many Travellers are likely to have a number of religious and personal items with them. These may include images of Mary the Mother of Jesus Christ, images of saints, medals, holy water, oils and ointments. Due to the rich religious and folk healing heritage in the community these items need to be treated with respect, as do the beliefs surrounding these items. It is best to check with family before removing any item from a body.
- Any personal jewellery should be given to family following a death.

Use of religious symbols

- As most Travellers are Roman Catholic, icons such as the crucifix, cross, images of saints and candles are appropriate in the mortuary area.



ADDITIONAL NOTES ON MATERNITY AND PAEDIATRIC CARE

Birth rituals

- Traditionally, pregnant Traveller women had no contact with dead bodies and this may still be the case among many.

Foetal, infant and child death

- Miscarried fetuses and stillbirths are treated according to Roman Catholic teaching. Children usually receive a full funeral
- Parents may need time and space to mourn with the child and this needs to be accommodated.
- Due to the literacy levels among some Travellers, issues of organ retention need to be carefully explained so there is proper consent.

essential practice point 07: Initiation ritual/infant baptism

Travellers are likely to want to have their child baptised if there is a threat to life.

DEVELOPING A LOCAL CONTACT FOR THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

The HSE in partnership with Traveller representative organisations has established a number of projects that work specifically on Traveller Health issues, part of which involve Primary Health Care Projects for Travellers. The key contacts for each are given below.

HSE Traveller Health Project Staff (for Traveller Health and Culture):

Counties:	Carlow, Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford	County:	Louth
Contact:	Liam Keane	Contact:	Martin Collum (<i>for name of local Traveller Health staff</i>)
Tel:	056 7703401	Tel:	049 437 3146
Email:	liam.keane@hse.ie	Email:	martin.collum@hse.ie

Counties:	Cavan and Monaghan	County:	Meath
Contact:	Enda Galligan (<i>for name of local Traveller Health staff</i>)	Contact:	Eileen Gilsean
Tel:	047 30400	Tel:	046 907 1679
Email:	enda.galligan@hse.ie	Email:	eileen.gilsean@hse.ie

Counties:	Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary	Counties:	Sligo and Leitrim
Contact:	Mary Kennedy	Contact:	Cara O'Neill, A/General Manager (<i>for name of local Traveller Health staff</i>)
Tel:	061 493916	Tel:	071 915 5175
Email:	maryg.kennedy@hse.ie	Email:	cara.oneill@hse.ie

Counties:	Cork and Kerry
Contact:	Deirdre O' Reilly
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Email:	deirdremary.oreilly@hse.ie

Counties:	Donegal
Contact:	Maire O' Leary
Tel:	074 912 3757 or 087 2229510
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Counties:	Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow
Contact:	Ronnie Fay, Pavee Point
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Counties:	Galway, Mayo and Roscommon
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Counties:	Laos, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath
Contact:	Fergal Fox
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HSE West	Tony Quilty
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HSE DNE	Martin Collum
Email:	martin.collum@hse.ie

HSE South	Liam Keane
Email:	liam.keane@hse.ie
	Rebecca Loughry
Email:	rebecca.loughry@hse.ie

Details of local Traveller organisations can be sourced through Pavee Point info@pavee.ie and information on local Traveller projects working on health issues can be accessed through the National Traveller Health Network lee.davis@pavee.ie



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Travellers Centre

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Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

