Fasting in the month of Ramadan is obligatory on all adult Muslims. Many patients and staff will be fasting or wanting to fast in Ramadan, which is expected to commence this year from around the 9th of July 2013*. It helps if NHS frontline staff is aware of and respect this important religious obligation and how such beliefs may affect the different elements of care. This is more important in hospitals where the services of a Muslim chaplain are not available.

*Subject to the sighting of the moon

What is a fast?
The fast lasts between dawn and sunset. It is compulsory for all healthy adult Muslims (who are otherwise not exempt) on reaching puberty; it is a total fast, with complete abstinence from both food and drink.

Who is exempt from the fast?
1. All those who are unable to fast due to illness (physical or mental) or being very frail.
2. Pregnant and menstruating women.
3. Lactating women who have concerns about their own, or their child’s health.
4. Travellers.

(Despite being in the above categories, some prefer not to miss these fasts in view of the special blessings and spiritual benefits during this time.)

How fast becomes void/broken?
When an agent of consequence reaches reaches the throat, stomach, intestines, or a cavity that has a path, immediately or via another cavity, to any of these three and settles therein the fast is broken. An agent of consequence is one that has nutritional or medicinal benefit or has been introduced by oneself. Thus this includes:
1. Eating or drinking intentionally
2. Oral and nasal medication including inhalers, nebuliser and via endotracheal intubation
3. Smoking
4. Rectal pessaries
5. Gastrostomy and jejunostomy

The patient’s perspective
1. The patient’s choice should be respected and advice should be offered on medical grounds. The Muslim Chaplain/Imam should be consulted where available.
2. If possible, hospital appointments should be given at appropriate times (i.e. outside prayer times - the Muslim patient will be aware of these times) or at the ending of the fast.
3. Arrangements for breaking of fast - availability of a quiet prayer space at prayer times would be appreciated.

What does not break the fast?
1. Injections (intravenous, intramuscular, intracardiac, intravenous, intradental and subcutaneous)
2. Bloods taken (thrombrotic or intravenous)
3. Eye and ear drops (unless tympanic membrane is perforated)
4. Vaginal pessaries, urethral infusion, transdermal patch, concentrated oxygen, epidural analgesia.
5. Eating and drinking out of forgetfulness.

Beginning and end time of fast
1. Ramadan timetable can be obtained from the local Mosque.
2. The Guardian newspaper publishes a timetable supplied by the Muslim Council of Britain throughout Ramadan in their Weather section.

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