A

n observant Jew is admitted to
t the hospital for cardiac surgery. The night before surgery, he speaks
with a friend, and the topic of med-
cations comes up. His friend asks
him if he is planning to use any
medications made of pig and sug-
ests that he can and should ask
for non-pork-derived products. The
patient is panicked and asks to
speak with the doctor to pre-empt
the possible use of pork products in
his medical care. During the dis-
cussion with the doctor, the patient
says that he is an observant Jew
and can’t consume pork products. The
doctor answers, “It’s my under-
standing that medications made
from pig are okay for you to use.”

Two of the world’s religions, Ju-
daism and Islam, have prohibitions
on the consumption of pork. There
are commonly used medical prod-
ucts that may be derived from pork,
such as heparin, some immuniza-
tions, and gelatins used to make
capsules. Does the ban on pork
consumption include medications or
medical products? Do we need to
ask patients if they have any dietary
restrictions before we prescribe
medications?

Religious laws are often subject
to varying interpretations. According
to Rabbi Tzvi H. Weinreb, emeritus
executive vice president of the Or-
thodox Union, “Pig derivatives are
only prohibited to be ingested via
normal digestive processes. There
is no prohibition whatsoever against
using or gaining benefit from pig or
pig derivatives intravenously or as
cosmetics or, for that matter, as the
main component of a football.”

Even oral medications made
with pork products are permitted; 
Rabbi Weinreb adds, “Given that
the pig product is so vitally neces-
sary to the health and well-being of
the patient, it would be permissible
for the patient to ingest it.” Judaic
law recognizes medical necessity
and the primacy of the health and
well-being of the patient. This view
is supported in a letter by Rabbi
Abraham Adler of the Kashrus and
Medicines Information service:

*It should be noted that according to
Jewish laws, there is no problem
with porcine or other animal derived
ingredients in non-oral products. This
includes vaccines, injections, sup-
positories, creams, and ointments.
—Rabbi Abraham Adler, MRPharmS
July 31, 2003*

What about Islam? In 1995, a
seminar was convened by the Is-
lamic Organization for Medical Sci-
ces, titled “The Judicially
Prohibited and Impure Substances
in Foodstuff and Drugs.” The find-
ings of more than 100 Islamic legal
scholars who met to clarify Islamic
purity laws became the basis for a
letter written in July 2001 by the
Regional Office of the World Health
Organization (WHO) for the Eastern
Mediterranean. Quoting from a
statement issued by the scholars,
the letter states:

*Transformation, which means the
conversion of a substance into an-
other substance, different in charac-
teristics, changes substances that
are judicially impure…into pure sub-
stances and changes substances
that are prohibited into lawful and
permissible substances.*

Consequently, the scholars de-
termined that the transformation of
pork products into gelatin alters
them sufficiently to make it permis-
sible for observant Muslims to re-
cieve vaccines containing pork
gelatin and to take medicine pack-
aged in gelatin capsules.

That judgment was made in
2001. A search of Islamic websites,
however, found wide variation in in-
terpretation of Islamic dietary laws
and pork-derived medications.

As with any issue that involves
faith and belief, there are bound to
be differences in interpretation.
While legal scholars in both Ju-
daism and Islam have weighed in
on the issue and declared that med-
ications made from pork products
are okay to use, it is possible that
individual patients or local authori-
ties may differ in their interpreta-
tion. Since the religious legal
scholars have pronounced medica-
tions made with pork products to
be acceptable, it seems unneces-
sary to ask patients if they have any
dietary restrictions that might apply
to medications. If patients ask or
have concerns, there are resources
available to guide them.

*Suggested Reading

3/magazine/23fob-ethicist-t.
html?_r=0

http://www.vaccinesafety.edu/
Porcine-vaccineapproval.htm