

Case-Based-Learning

Delivering Bad News

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Introductions

- Name
- Medical school and year
- Future specialty (can also say “undecided!”)

Before we begin, some ground rules:

- We are all here to learn! Let's make this a safe and non-judgmental space
- Participants will be called on, you can choose to “pass”!

Case

Ms. Jones is a 65 year old female with hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, CKD Stage III, and COPD who presented with shortness of breath and was found to have COVID-19 infection with a complicated course. She is now on a non-rebreather and imaging shows extensive and irreversible pulmonary fibrosis. The treatment team thinks she has days to weeks to live.

You are the intern taking care of Ms. Jones and your attending asks you to take the lead in delivering the news that she has days to weeks to live.

When you enter the room, Ms. Jones and two more adults are present. How would you start the conversation? What is important to ask before giving Ms. Jones her prognosis?

- Before entering room, prepare any updates and results
- Prepare emotionally; what phrases to use and/or avoid?
- Speak frankly and compassionately
- Introduce myself to everyone in the room, ask for names and relationship to patient of everyone in the room
- Make sure patient is comfortable with what information is shared and with whom? Is there anyone missing from the room that they would like included in the discussion? (May be difficult due to COVID-19 protocol, but maybe can connect via phone/video)
- Check patient understanding of illness
- Pay special attention to patient's response as well as the other people present in the room

Starting a conversation Before you deliver bad news

- **Introduce yourself.** Ask who is present with the patient. Ask for names and relationship to the patient.
 - *For example: My name is XYZ (I use she/her pronouns). I am a medical student on your treatment team. Who is here with you today?*
- **Gauge their understanding of their illness.**
 - *For example: "What is your understanding of your illness and treatment?" "What have doctors told you about XYZ?"*
 - Before the family meeting, ask the family member the same question. They may have a different understanding of what is going on!
 - *For Example: "What is your understanding of the patient's illness and treatment?"*
- **Gauge how much detail the patient wants to know.**
 - *For example: "Would you like to know some details or would like to hear all of the details?"*

How would you deliver the news about treatment and prognosis?

- Begin by asking general questions about how the patient is feeling, any anxiety surrounding the situation and the potential of bad news?
- “I’m afraid that I don’t have great news for you today...” to prepare for delivery of bad news, then ask if patient is ready to proceed with the discussion at the current time
- Deliver information in small parts to ensure clarity and understanding
- Stay away from medical terms for increased communication and understanding
- Give patient space (pauses during/after discussion) and time to process the news
- Don’t rush delivery of treatment, prognosis, etc.; set apart dedicated time for the discussion
- Be mindful of posture, sit eye-level with the patient

Notes

Give a warning

Ask permission to share information

Be honest and direct when you deliver the news.

Do not use euphemisms.

Do not use technical jargon.

Tell the patient what you can offer

Share small amounts of information at a time so that it is easier for the patient and the family to understand.

Give the patient time to process the information.

Examples

“I’m sorry, but I have bad news.”

“Could I share information about XYZ?”

“Ms. Jones, we are currently treating you with XYZ and you are currently on the non-rebreather mask which is helping you breathe because your lung was damaged from the COVID-19 infection. What we can offer is supportive measures to relieve discomfort, but there are no treatments to reverse the damage. I wish things were different.”

“I am afraid that time is short. We think you have days to weeks to live.”

Ms. Jones starts to cry. How would you respond?

- Stay with the patient, offer to hold hand if patient is comfortable with it
- Listen to patient, allow for silence/pauses to give them space to process
- Ask if patient would like me to stay in the room or be alone to process
- Emphasize availability for any future questions, if the patient experiences new symptoms, pain, etc.
- Patient may be in denial which is part of processing big news
- Allow patient to cry or express any emotion they may be feeling, can offer tissues

Key ideas

- Name the emotion. Validate their emotions.
- After delivering the news, allow time for silence.
- Listen, provide space for them to cry. Offer tissues.
- Explore what is most important for the patient and what you can do to help them. For example: “What is most important to you right now?”
- Offer palliative care and spiritual care services, such as chaplaincy services.
- Ask the patient to verbalize their understanding of what you have told them; this gives you an opportunity to make sure there are no misunderstandings.
- Give patients and family an opportunity to ask questions.

Thank you to our participants!

Please share your comments on the case and the discussion