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Breaking bad news

Definition:

breaking bad news is when the diagnosis (new diagnosis/relapse) is shared with the patient/family
Situations such as:

- Diagnosis of life limiting illness
- Disease recurrence
- Spread of disease
- Irreversible side effects
- Positive results of genetic tests
- Discussing palliative and end of life care
Why is Breaking Bad News Difficult?

- Uncertainty in dealing with intense emotional response
- Fear of patient’s reaction to the news
- Challenge of delivering the news appropriately and sensitively for the patient
Why is Breaking Bad News Difficult?

• Concern for how the news will affect patient/family
• Fear of how this affects your emotion
• Not wanting to take away hope
The “S-P-I-K-E-S” 6 Step Protocol

S: Getting the SETTING right
P: Assessing what the patient PERCEIVES
I: Obtaining an INVITATION to share the news
K: Giving the KNOWLEDGE and information
E: Addressing the patient’s EMOTIONS
S: SUMMARY
SETTING

- Anticipate the possibility of bad news
- Arrange for adequate time
- Avoid telephone
- Private setting, sitting down
- Turn off beeper, no interruptions
- Support person present, if desired
- Review the condition, prognosis and treatments (relevant clinical information) before the visit

Mentally rehearse, identify words /phrases to use and avoid
Finding out what the patient knows or PERCEIVES

Introduce yourself to everyone

- Before you tell, ask ......
  - What do they Know? e.g. “what have you been told so far?”
  - How much do you understand about your illness?
  - How do you feel?
  - What is troubling you the most?

Note denial (if present) or misinformation
Determine what/how much the patient/family wants to know

Different ways of asking from the patient to give the information:

Would you like me to explain ........?  
Do you want to know what’s happening?

- Accept their right not to know  
- Have family/support persons present
KNOWLEDGE

• The first step is to “Fire a Warning Shot” and warn the patient and family that the incoming news is not good
  “Unfortunately I have some bad news to tell you,”
  “I am sorry to tell you,”
  “Things are not going in the direction we had hoped,”

• Giving information (based on the assessed level of patient’s understanding, compliance, and wishes for disclosure)

• Instead of using technical language, show patient/family concrete examples of trends in lab work or radiology

• Be frank but compassionate
• Small chunks
patients report that

“the most important component of the process of breaking bad news is the content itself”

specifically the **expertise** and the **specific detail** provided during the conversation

and

Majority of patients want the truth
Emotions

- Observe for and allow emotional reactions, proceed at the patient/family’s pace
- Allow for silence and tears
- Be empathetic
- Kleenex handy, use of touch
- **Naming the feeling**
- **Understanding**
- **Respecting**
- **Supporting**
Summary

- Respectfully and gently repeat any important points – patients who are shocked or upset will not take in much information.

- Ensure to answer any questions or concerns that can be addressed at this stage.

- Offer realistic hope.

- Offer Further Availability, Information.

- Use interdisciplinary resources.

- Make follow-up plans.
Take care of your own needs!
What not to do

- Give a definite time span
- Pretend treatment is working if it isn’t
- Say “Nothing can be done”.
- BBNs over the phone
- Avoid the patient
- Leave patient in suspense
- Lie to the patient
- Tell patient if he or she doesn’t want to know
- Interrupt excessively
- Use jargon
- Give excessive information as this causes confusion
- Be judgmental
- argue with or criticize colleagues
How bad news is discussed can affect important outcomes, including:

- Comprehension of information
- Satisfaction with medical care
- Level of hopefulness
- Subsequent psychological adjustment
If you ask any police officer what the worst part of the job is, they will always say breaking bad news to relatives, but this is not the truth. The worst part is staying in the room after you’ve broken the news, so that you’re forced to be there when someone’s life disintegrates around them. Some people say it doesn’t bother them - such people are not to be trusted.

~ Ben Aaronovitch