

Communicating Bad News

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Breaking bad news to patients is one of the most difficult responsibilities in the practice of medicine, particularly if the illness is terminal. It becomes even more stressful when the patient is a child. However, little formal training is offered in medical school to prepare physicians for this daunting task, resulting in discomfort and anxiety delivering the news, and sometimes, emotional disengagement from patients. Oncologists are frequently the bearers of bad news. Rapid advances in cancer treatment have made it much easier to offer hope to the patient, but at the same time created more situations such as disease recurrence and issues of DNR status and hospice care, where increased clinician skill is required for communication with patients and families.

When an illness is serious or a child dies, families deserve to be told in a way that helps them cope with their grief. Numerous studies have shown that patients prefer frank and empathetic disclosure of a terminal diagnosis. Parents vividly remember the manner in which the diagnosis of their child's illness was communicated to them for years after the event and this experience tests the strength of the doctor - patient relationship. Using the Rabow McPhee ABCDE mnemonic for breaking bad news as a guide, (Advance preparation, Building a therapeutic environment, Communicating well, Dealing with patient and family reactions, Encouraging and validating patient and physician reactions), physicians can be trained in communication skills that can help them deliver news honestly without taking away hope from patients or experiencing stress and anxiety themselves.