

You can break bad news well

Module 4

Learning objectives

- Discuss the value of telling the truth to patients
- Demonstrate the steps in ‘ Break News’

Case Scenario

- You are seeing a 54 year old man at home who has come from the hospital where he has had some tests done. The medical note says that the test shows advanced cancer of the oesophagus
- Should you tell him the truth?
- Why or why not?

Telling the truth

n Benefits

- reduces uncertainty and helps to answer unanswered questions reduces unrealistic hope
- allows the patient to make informed choices and reduce expenditure on futile treatments
- allows the patient to make realistic plans
- allows honest communication with family and health workers
- if done well, can build on the relationship of trust between patient and carer.

Telling the truth

“Truth is one of the most powerful medicines available to us, but we still need to develop a proper understanding of the right timing and dosage for each patient.”

Adapted from Simpson (1979)

Case scenario contd...

- n While you are thinking what to tell him, his daughter asks to speak to you outside. She says ‘You must not tell him anything that may upset him. He will not cope’.
- n Should you agree to the daughter’s request?
- n Why or why not?

Handling collusion

- n Acknowledge reaction and the relative's concern
- n Explore the reasons and acknowledge them
- n Avoid judgmental response
- n Ask how does it affect him / her
- n Explain likely problems for the patient and family
- n Try to work out a mutually acceptable solution

Breaking bad news

n Who does it?

- those who the patient knows and trusts
- those who have the skill of conveying the message
- those who can handle the reactions effectively
- those who know the disease, prognosis and the treatment

Breaking bad news

n When?

- whenever the patient asks
- provided the patient has been given the opportunity to ask!
- breaking bad news can be an ongoing process

Steps to breaking bad news

- Set the right physical context
- Explore the level of awareness
- Explore what patient wants to know
- Sharing the information
 - warning shot
 - pause
 - brief Information
 - check clarity
- Handling reactions
- Future Plan

Steps using 'BREAK NEWS'

- n **Be prepared**
- n **Relatives; think who should be there**
- n **Expectations; check**
- n **Assess what is appropriate**
- n **Knowledge sharing**
- n **Never say 'there is nothing we can do'**
- n **Empathise**
- n **Way forward; including review and repetition**
- n **Stop and reflect**

Role Play

n A 60 year old woman in a general medical ward who has cancer of her breast. Her swelling is discharging pus. She is very weak and her husband tells you that she is not eating the hospital food. She complains of pain in her back and has a large wound on her sacrum.

She asks

Why is the wound not healing?

What is happening to me?

Summary

- n Best learned through **experience**
- n Identify **our skills** and try to refine them
- n Identify **our shortcomings** and try to overcome them
- n There are **no fixed** guidelines
- n Should be **patient centered** and **context oriented**

- n These resources are developed as part of the THET multi-country project whose goal is to strengthen and integrate palliative care into national health systems through a public health primary care approach
- Acknowledgement given to Cairdeas International Palliative Care Trust and MPCU for their preparation and adaptation
 - part of the teaching materials for the Palliative Care Toolkit training with modules as per the Training Manual
 - can be used as basic PC presentations when facilitators are encouraged to adapt and make contextual



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