

Physicians



PHAX

June, 2004

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Delivering Bad News Part 1

Question: What steps do you take to prepare to give bad news before talking with the patient?

Case Scenario: You are caring for a previously healthy 52 year-old man with a new problem of abdominal pain. After treatments fail, a diagnostic abdominal CT scan is done showing a focal mass with ulceration in the body of the stomach and numerous (more than 10) densities in the liver compatible with liver metastases. The radiologist feels that the findings are absolutely typical of metastatic stomach cancer. How do you prepare to discuss these test results with the patient?

Main Teaching Points:

1. Create an appropriate physical setting: A quiet, comfortable room, turn off beeper, check personal appearance, have participants, including yourself, sitting down.
2. Determine who should be present? Ask the patient whom they want to participate – clarify relationships to patient. Decide if you want others present (e.g. nurse, consultant, chaplain, social worker) and obtain patient/family permission.
3. Think through your goals for the meeting as well as possible goals of the patient.
4. Make sure you know basic information about the patient's disease, prognosis, and treatment options.
5. Special circumstances: Patient not competent (developmentally delayed, dementia, etc.). Make sure legal decision-maker is present.
6. Special circumstances: Patient doesn't speak English. Obtain a skilled medical interpreter if the patient or family does not speak English. Use ATT translation service or other phone service if necessary.

References: Weissman, D. Fast Facts and Concepts #6: Delivering Bad News – Part 1. June 2000. End-of-Life Physician Education Resource Center, www.eperc.mcw.edu.