

A Personal Narrative on Truth Telling in Patient Care

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects the importance of being honest with the patient throughout his course of stay in the hospital. It is important that as a doctor, disclosing information to the patient should be prioritized as opposed what the family of the patient wants the patient to know. By withholding this information, doctors are denying the patient his right to choose and execute his actions based on the information he has.

Key words: Truth telling, patient rights, patient

Truth telling is defined as “avoidance of lying, deception, misrepresentation, and non-disclosure in interactions with patients or relevant to patient care” [1].

There are different consequences that can arise from the physician disclosing the diagnosis to the patient. In a lot of cases by doing so, the physician reduces the patient’s fears and anxieties, and in other cases, knowing the diagnosis might further upset the patient. But it is important to be honest with the patient, to establish the patients trust in the physician, which is an essential component for treating the patient. Also by establishing this trust, it is easier to maintain a good rapport with the patient thus enabling the physician to closely monitor the progress of the patient’s illness.

A few months back I came across a 70-year-old patient in the medicine ward. We were taking his history, when he kept asking us, if we knew what his diagnosis was. As we did not have access to his medical records, we did not know it at the time. He was clearly very upset and told us to leave the premises. When his relatives came to his bedside, they told us that he was diagnosed with Hepatocellular Carcinoma but they did not want the doctor to disclose the diagnosis to the patient as it would upset him, and they wanted their father to live out the rest of his life happily.

The four principles of medical ethics are “respect for autonomy of the patient, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice” [2]. In the above case by withholding the diagnoses from the patient, the doctor and family members are taking away the patient’s right to make a decision about the course of his treatment based on the information available to him. Thus incapacitating the patient and taking away from him, his right to choose what he wants. Beneficence, in this scenario would be doing what is best for the patient. It is clear from the above scenario that not knowing his diagnosis made the patient anxious and on edge. Thus to put the patients mind at peace, the best thing to do for the patient would be to tell him what his diagnosis was. By withholding his diagnosis, justice was not being done in this case as the patents right to autonomy was being taken away from him.

In the above case, although the intention of the family to hide the patient's diagnosis was good, as they did not want to upset their father, it is the doctor's responsibility to tell the patient all the relevant aspects of his illness and the available treatment options. And because the family was worried about upsetting their father, the truth about the diagnosis could be told to the patient in sensitive and compassionate way thus helping the patient to accept his diagnosis.

The practice of withholding the diagnosis from the patient, as per the family's wishes, is very common India. There are situations when this is acceptable and situations when it is not. It is acceptable to withhold the diagnosis from the patient if the patient themselves ask the doctor not to disclose their diagnosis to them or if the patient is mentally incompetent and is not capable of handling the news. In all the other circumstances it is the physician's responsibility to disclose the diagnosis to the patient.

REFERENCES

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