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New program helps physicians break bad news

According to research from the Department of Critical Care at the Children's National Medical Center, putting physicians through a simple 1-day training course can significantly improve their interpersonal skills when communicating bad news to their patients. Besides the obvious short-term emotional damage that a lack of interpersonal skill can cause, the effects are often much more serious. If handled improperly, communication of bad news can generate feelings of mistrust, anger, fear, and blame. It can also have long-term effects in the form of emotional consequences for the family. On the other hand, good interpersonal skills help improve the patient-physician relationship and have been shown to influence patient satisfaction, compliance, and even health status.

This 1-day training comes in the form of two role-playing sessions: one in the morning, and one in the afternoon. In the first session, the untrained physician is randomly given one of two scenarios and is recorded while communicating the bad news to a patient. They are then given feedback on how to improve. In the second session, the physician is given the other scenario and is recorded while communicating the bad news to a patient. In each case, the patient/actor is backed by 15 hours of training in appropriate role-playing. This training includes being coached on how to ask relevant medical questions, react in a manner consistent with patients in the pediatric intensive care unit, and effectively simulating feelings of anger, frustration, denial, self-blame, and grief.

An independent reviewer (blinded to the order of the sessions) then reviews the videotaped recordings and evaluates each physician based on 26 points.

Results show that this training is highly effective in the short-term (overall performance in 5 categories revealed a highly significant improvement), but further studies will have to be done to analyze the effects of the program in the long-term.