



Soft Skills for Medicine & Beyond: Breaking bad news

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Business English UK Conference, June 2015

The overview

- The reality
- The definition
- The context
- The communication model
- The wider application
- The approach



The reality

- A couple whose child is diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. 1 2 3 4 5 6
- A teenager signed to a major under 18's football team unable to play this season due to a shoulder injury. 1 2 3 4 5 6
- An 80-year-old woman with pancreatic cancer now in stage 3. 1 2 3 4 5 6
- A couple told they are not able to have children. 1 2 3 4 5 6
- A single mother told her back pain is caused by the return of breast cancer. 1 2 3 4 5 6
- An elderly confused patient has to be moved to a different ward. 1 2 3 4 5 6

The definition

‘Bad news is any information, which adversely and seriously affects an individual’s view of his or her future’

‘Bad news is always in the eye of the beholder.’

Baile et al (2000)



The context: Clinician



'I've cried about a patient many a time. [...] You don't cry around the patient, you do it when they've left the clinic room. Then you pull yourself together, wash your face and get the next patient in. [...] if I didn't genuinely care about my patients I wouldn't be half as good at my job.'

The Guardian (March 2015)



The context: What NOT to do

- **Break bad news over the phone**
- Avoid the patient
- **Leave patient in suspense**
- Lie to the patient
- **Tell patient if he or she doesn't want to know**
- Interrupt excessively
- **Use jargon**
- Give excessive information as this causes confusion
- **Collude with patient**
- Be judgmental
- **Give a definite time span**
- Pretend treatment is working if it isn't.
- **Say 'Nothing can be done'**



SPIKES: Setting

Emergency cubicle

- Lack privacy
- Impersonal
- Medical equipment
- Position of patient & doctor

Consulting room

- Comfortable & relaxed
- Doctor's personal effects
- Position of patient & doctor



SPIKES: Perception

1. I'm _____ very good.

1. Unfortunately _____ tell you.

3. I'm _____ we had thought.



The language of death & dying

Lay person



Medical professional

I'm sorry to have to tell you that your mother has just _____.



SPIKES: Invitation & Knowledge

Invitation

- *How are you getting on?*
- *What did they tell you at the hospital?*
- *Is there anything you want to know about your tests/illness/operation?*
- *Some people like detailed information, others just want the big picture. What is your preference?*



SPIKES: Empathy & Emotion

- Anyone in your shoes would be upset
- Tell me what is upsetting you the most?
- Is there anyone you would like me to call?
- I would probably feel the same way.
- We will work through this together.
- I imagine it feels overwhelming.
- A lot of people would feel angry right now

| Function | Language |
|------------|----------|
| Legitimize | |
| Explore | |
| Empathize | |
| Support | |



SPIKES: Empathy & Emotion

| Function | Language |
|------------|---|
| Legitimize | Anyone in your shoes would be upset I would probably feel the same way. A lot of people would feel angry right now. |
| Explore | (Can you) Tell me what is upsetting you the most? |
| Empathize | I imagine it feels overwhelming. |
| Support | We will work through this together. Is there anyone you would like me to call? |



SPIKES: Empathy & Emotion

‘While there was no evidence that differences in pronunciation cause misunderstandings [...], the rhythm and intonation of speech which convey both information and attitudes can [...] affect how performance is rated.’

Centre for Language, Discourse &
Communication,
King’s College London (2014)



SPIKES: Strategy & Summary

- Ask if patients wish to discuss planning for the future now, or at a later date
- Present possible treatment options
- Offer agenda for the next meeting if relevant
- Ask if patients want significant others to attend follow up meeting



THE wider application

Who?

Allied healthcare professionals

Legal professionals

Management roles

Human Resources

Trades Union reps

What?

- Refusal of requests
- Performance appraisals
- Budget cuts
- Redundancy
- Termination of contracts
- Organizational change



The approach



Performance



Observation



What definitely NOT to do



Case study

Claire: 44 year-old single mother of 2 teenagers.

GP: Well, you know where it is?
[*Gestures and pats head*] You've got 4 months.



Medical English ...



... going beyond just 'talking' to the patient.

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