

As radiologists we are often faced with a situation where we have discovered a serious or life threatening disease that a patient and his family don't know about. This situation poses many dilemmas, both ethical and practical. These include but are not limited to questions such as who is the best person to communicate this information? The radiologist or the treating physician? Who should be told? Patient or family or both?

By and large radiologists are not well equipped to deal with these situations. Our training and evaluation systems do not take this aspect of our daily life into account. We rarely if ever receive formal training in breaking bad news or in medical ethics. These vital aspects of our professional life are left to be learnt by accident or by experience.

Another important factor in these circumstances is the issue of patient autonomy and confidentiality.

In our social set up where there are very often a number of people involved in making decisions regarding the care to be given to a particular individual, patient autonomy and confidentiality are often totally disregarded. The patient is often the last to discover as what is happening to him and why does he require a particular treatment.

While in my opinion the western concept patient autonomy is not totally applicable to our society where the family and other social groups are so important in our lives and where the lack of education makes it harder for individuals to make rational informed decisions on their own, I also feel that we take paternalism too far. The typical examples are cancer patients. The families often demand that the patient not be told of the diagnosis let alone take part in the decision making process. There is a lot to be said for "soft paternalism" where the doctor and or the family members directs the decision making however total exclusion of the patient from this process is unacceptable in any circumstance. Patient may be informed at their level of understanding but they need to know.

The ugliest form of paternalism is where the patient knows the diagnosis, understands the consequences of his or her actions in accepting or refusing a particular course of treatment but is over ridden by the family. These situations are particularly difficult to handle. In my opinion the patient's wishes must take precedence over all else. This may lead to serious conflicts and unhappiness in the patients' families and withdrawal of support and cooperation from them. The consequences need to be understood and dealt with as appropriate.

The last matter I want to talk about is the patient confidentiality issue. This is another area that is ignored in our society. Family members who may not be directly involved in the care of a patient expect the details of the diagnosis and prognosis to be shared and discussed with them. Relatives and friends medical conditions are the subject of gossip and small talk. This again an area where our attitudes are important. We need to educate the society at large and inculcate within them the need for privacy and respect for individual dignity.

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