

EDITORIAL

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<p>To Cite: McCausland T. Empathy matters when speaking with a patient's family. <i>JHD</i>.2022;7(3):532–534. https://doi.org/10.21853/JHD.2022.185</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Tammy McCausland Bluffton, SC USA tmccausl@proton.me</p> <p>Copyright: ©2022 The Authors. Published by Archetype Health Pty Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.</p>	<p>SUMMARY Nobody wants to receive the dreaded call about a family member in the hospital. But when it happens, healthcare providers should be empathic and communicate with compassion when interacting with family members.</p> <p>Key Words Empathy; communication; families; elder care; hospitalisation</p>
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INTRODUCTION

On July 15, 2021, I received a frantic early morning telephone call from my mother. My father had been in a car accident in the late afternoon the day before and was in critical care at the regional hospital. Without having time to fully process this news emotionally, I quickly took action. I called my sister and then called the hospital to inquire about my father's condition. We quickly established that I would be the primary point of contact to call the hospital twice daily for updates.

My parents live in Canada, and I reside in the United States. Due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time, I could not simply hop on the next plane to Canada. On July 5, 2021, the Canadian government had dropped the 14-day quarantine restriction for fully vaccinated Canadians, and after 18 months, I was finally able to travel to see my parents without having to quarantine. I needed a negative PCR test within 72 hours prior to entering the country, however. At that time where I live, PCR test results took as long as 48 hours. There was no jumping on the next plane.

The nurses I spoke to in the twice daily check-ins were kind, thoughtful, and detailed. A few days in, I had the opportunity to speak with the cardiologist in charge of my father's care. He began with, "This is Dr. X. I was *forced* to call you. . . ." [emphasis mine]. The cardiologist was brusque when updating me on my father's health and prognosis. He seemed impatient and not willing to give me much time to ask questions.

Empathy is critical—at *any* time and *all* times—when healthcare providers speak to patients' families, especially older patients who are hospitalised. Many, like the nurses caring for my father, take a holistic approach and do it well. Some, like the cardiologist, fail miserably perhaps due to a reductionist view of what makes patients better. Fortunately, my father's health improved.

Why empathy and effective communication matter

Dr Suneel Dhand explores the topic of communicating with patients' families during hospitalisation.¹ He explains that "Some doctors see the responsibility of 'speaking with family' as an extra part of the job and a bit of a drag. That's an unfortunate attitude, as fewer things could be as important to your patient as solid communication both with them and their families."¹ He suggests that "how to communicate with patients' families" is not taught nearly enough in medical school.¹ Dhand contends that it is the healthcare providers' job to communicate with and educate patients' families.¹ He suggests several ways to do so: establish contact and set expectations; keep families in the loop with regular updates; and embrace the responsibility of communicating with families.¹ "I've always taught medical students to imagine themselves in a position where the person they love most in the world is sick in the hospital. Think about how much you would appreciate a good doctor who kept you in the loop and fully respected your right to know what was happening," he writes. "Be that physician—the one family members appreciate for always communicating and for understanding that they're also sharing this journey."¹

"The complexity of healthcare needs in an aging population demands that physicians and nurses have appropriate communication skills geared toward working with older adults and their families," write Huang et al.² Ranjan et al.³ discuss the importance of a holistic approach that includes good communication skills: "There are certain basic principles of practicing good communication. Patient listening, empathy, and paying attention to the paraverbal and nonverbal components of the communication are the important ones that are frequently neglected. . . . Formal training of the doctors in improving communication skills is necessary and has proven to improve overall outcome." The authors recommend formal training in communication skills in medical curriculum and training practitioners in the form of continuing medical education (CME) credits.³

Dr Lauren Chiu highlights key pieces of information physicians can establish when talking to a patient's family members.⁴ This information includes finding out what they already know, how much they want to know, and how much the patient wants them to know.⁴ She suggests physicians practice good communication in tone of voice and body language.⁴ "Just remember the basic principles: communicate with family members in a way that you would appreciate being communicated to if it was your own loved one in hospital," Chiu writes.⁴

Kind and thoughtful communication helps

When writing this editorial, I was reminded of *The Golden Girls*' episode entitled "Sick and Tired". Dorothy Zbornak, happy to have a chronic fatigue syndrome diagnosis, runs into Dr Budd, a specialist she had sought treatment from, but who had dismissed her concerns.⁵ Dorothy says,

I don't know where you doctors lose your humanity, but you lose it. . . . if all of you at the beginning of your careers could get very sick and very scared for a while, you'd probably learn more from that than from anything else. You better start listening to your patients. They need to be heard. They need caring. They need compassion. They need attending to. . . . someday

*Dr Budd, you're going to be on the other side of the table, and as angry as I am and as angry as I always will be, I still wish you a better doctor than you were to me.*⁵

My family and I feel fortunate that my father received excellent care and that he was able to leave the hospital 11 days after his accident. The cardiologist caring for my father didn't communicate with empathy, compassion, or understanding. Maybe he didn't care enough to try. But he could have done better.

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