

The Other Side

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Have you ever stopped and thought about what it is like to be the patient?

As an ST5 doctor in Elderly Medicine I'm not sure I had until quite out of the blue in August last year I was thrown onto the other side. I had been on holiday in California with my husband and developed what we initially thought was renal colic. Unfortunately it turned out not to be that straightforward and I ended up in an American hospital with an obstructive uropathy secondary to a pelvis full of an unidentified tumour. The Americans were all ready to go ahead with a laparotomy and debulking procedure there and then, but I had other ideas and just wanted to come home. So after a retrograde ureteric stenting procedure we flew home with a provisional diagnosis of ovarian carcinoma.

I was admitted to hospital soon after we returned to the UK to expedite further investigations and after numerous scans and biopsies a diagnosis of Desmoplastic Small Round Cell Tumour (DSRCT) was made. This is an extremely rare aggressive form of sarcoma that usually affects children and teenagers. I had liver and bone metastases at presentation so I knew full well I was in a palliative situation.

Having come through this diagnostic nightmare I have obviously had bad news broken to me on several occasions along the journey. For unknown reasons I think some doctors forget the rule book when dealing with other members of their profession. I remember being told by the most junior member of the medical team that I had metastatic disease without having a friend or relative with me, with no clarification of what I already understood, with no warning shot and none of the ward nurses were made aware I had just received such devastating news. On the other hand when I was told the definitive diagnosis by my Oncologist, the situation was handled in much more sensitive manner and caused me much less distress despite this news probably being more devastating in the whole grand scheme of things. In my experience 'breaking bad news' can be seen by doctors as just another task to undertake in an already pressurised job. However, as the patient it is your 'one and only time' to receive this news and the way it is delivered can really have a massive impact. When done badly it can cause immense and irreparable harm.

One aspect of care that I personally really appreciate is continuity. This is so difficult particularly for junior doctors to achieve in the

modern day NHS with shift patterns and rotations and I am not sure anyone has any easy answers as to how this could be improved. However, it is much easier to achieve in Primary Care. My GP is great at maintaining continuity and given my now complex medical history it is so reassuring to know that he knows me and my problems really well.

These behaviours are small and easy to achieve, but make the world of difference to patients when they are in such a vulnerable place. My Consultant Oncologist is great at the 'little things' and I am sure my trust and respect for him comes from his empathic manner on a human level rather than anything to do with his clinical acumen.

It really is the 'little things' you appreciate as a patient; someone holding your hand when you're upset, someone sitting down next to you instead of standing over you, a friendly smile, an open body posture.

If you would like to read more about my story, 'The Other Side' is available in paperback and Kindle formats from www.theothersidestory.co.uk. All profits from the sale of the book are being donated to the Yorkshire Cancer Centre.

Learning Points

1. Remember the 'little things' when interacting with patients.
2. Breaking bad news is not just another 'task' and should be handled with thought to the impact that the news will have on the patient.
3. You need to be both doctor to and advocate for your patients.
4. Patients really do appreciate continuity of care.

Free NICE BNF prescribing app launched

Health and social care professionals can now access the latest up-to-date prescribing information from the British National Formulary (BNF) at the touch of a button. The official NICE BNF app is available to download for free for users of Android and iPhone smartphones. The app also runs on the iPod touch. It enables users to browse and search full content from BNF, receive notifications when new editions and updates are available, bookmark content and even choose their preferred reading settings. Once downloaded, the app can be run without an internet connection meaning that professionals can access the BNF wherever they are.

Users will need to enter their NHS Athens user name and password to activate the app and download the content.

(An app for the British National Formulary for Children (BNFC) is in the late stages of development and will be released soon).

Android link: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=uk.org.nice.bnf>

iPhone link: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/nice-bnf/id523093958>

Link to register for NHS Athens: <https://register.athensams.net/nhs/nhseng/>