

Breaking Bad News – Perceptions of Pediatric Residents

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The present study evaluated the perceptions and practice of 92 final year pediatric residents with regard to breaking bad news. Only 16% of residents had received any training in communication skills. Majority (65%) of the residents were not comfortable while breaking bad news.

Keywords: *Communication skills, Survey, Training*

Communication skills training has not been formally included in the postgraduate curriculum, even though the MCI has recognized its importance in undergraduate medical education [1]. Resident doctors generally have poor communication skills although they face daily challenges dealing with angry or dissatisfied relatives [2]. Breaking bad news is a key determinant of psychological well-being, especially when dealing with chronic illnesses [3]. There has been some progress with the introduction of the ATCOM module, but the reliance on 'role models' and the 'hidden curriculum' have been the norm [4,5].

The aim of the present study was to assess the perceptions and practice of final year pediatric residents with regard to breaking bad news. Participants were administered a structured questionnaire after checking for content validity, on their perceptions and practice with special reference to breaking bad news based on the SPIKES protocol [6].

There were 92 final year participating residents (48 boys); 49 (54%) were from Kerala, 16 (18%) from Karnataka, 14 (15%) from Tamil Nadu, 2 (2%) from Chandigarh and 1 (1%) each from West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. Pediatric residents from government medical colleges and private medical colleges constituted 30 (33%) and 22 (24%) respectively. There were 38 (42%) residents from private teaching institutions and 1(1%) from government teaching hospitals. They included 18 (20%) DCH students, 47 (51%) DNB students and 27 (29%) MD students.

Only 15 (16%) residents had received any training in communication skills. Only 32 (35%) residents were comfortable while breaking bad news (**Table I**).

Breaking bad news to parents, who often are not prepared for it, alters their perceptions of the future of their children suddenly and often irrevocably, with well described consequences for the recipients as well as the doctors [3]. The present study emphasizes that a huge lacuna exists in training of pediatric residents, who generally have no exposure to any formal training in communication skills [2].

Almost two thirds reported feeling uncomfortable while breaking bad news, and were not familiar with the structure and components of the complex procedure. In a previous study we have found that the communication skills of pediatric residents need improvement [7]. Ascertaining the prior level of understanding of the parents, giving the unpleasant news in small fractions' and periodic checking for comprehension are essential steps to be followed in the process of breaking bad news [6].

There are reports that communication skills can be improved with short training workshops [8]. Research has shown that communication skills, generally do not improve after residency [9]. Our findings support the need for incorporation of structured communication skills training with emphasis on difficult issues like breaking bad news, in the Post Graduate curriculum.

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TABLE I AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON BREAKING BAD NEWS
BY THE RESIDENTS ($n=92$)

<i>Question</i>	<i>No. (%)</i>
Are you comfortable in breaking bad news to parents?	32 (35)
Do you try to ensure privacy in breaking the bad news?	83 (90)
Do you introduce yourself first?	60 (65)
Do you give information in small fractions rather than all at once?	53 (58)
Do you check how much the parents already know before you start?	57 (62)
Do you check parent's understanding periodically ?	59 (64)
Do you encourage to voice the concern of parents?	66 (72)
Do you tolerate periods of silence during the interview?	60 (65)
Do you look for non-verbal cues during the interview	56 (61)
Do you respond to the parent's feelings during the interview?	77 (84)
Do you summarize before ending the interview?	52 (57)