

Cultural Issues

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE - HANDLING COLLUSION

Medicine observes a code of ethics without which people would not feel safe in the hospitals of the world.

Theoretically, according to legislation, the patient has priority in learning the diagnosis, but in practice the diagnosis is more often communicated to the family (in Morocco, this is formally accepted in Art. 31 of the Moroccan deontological code).

The lack of undergraduate and subsequent communication training in the giving of bad news makes the doctor, who should take responsibility for the act, pass on to the GP or the family the task of informing the patient.

The therapeutic decision, in most European countries, is made in a dominant paternalistic manner, the patient's autonomy being a secondary concern addressed in light of the cultural context in which the doctor, the patient and the family live.

In Western Europe, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, the patient demands to learn the truth about his or her health, requests to be told the exact diagnosis and gets involved in deciding and accepting the treatment.

In Eastern Europe, the patient has this same right, but due to lack of communication training, the doctor often concedes to the family's request to engage in a conspiracy of silence in order to spare the patient any negative attitudes towards the illness.

A doctor from Casablanca, says Imane, a student from Morocco, told a patient she had cancer. After the recommended treatment, the cancer returned. The patient accused the doctor and blamed him for not recommending the treatment with taxotere. "Indeed, the doctor confessed, I did not consider taxotere because it was too expensive for her. From now on, I shall inform my patients of all the options available for their disease, and then they can decide whether they can or cannot pay."

The conspiracy of silence is not a solution in communicating with the patient. Many times it is brought about by underlying illiteracy, poverty, lack of punctuality, misunderstanding of medical terminology, folk beliefs and traditional medicine deeply rooted in peoples' cultures.

Topics for Forum:

- What methods of communication with the patient do you suggest so that the doctor does not become part of a conspiracy of silence?

- Do you find any advantages to the doctor withholding information from the patient? Give examples from your own experience.

- Will you, as a doctor, engage in a conspiracy of silence towards your patients? Under what circumstances?