Personal practice

Educating medical students about death and dying

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Doctors in every branch of medicine must from time to time deal with patients who are dying or who have life threatening illnesses. Many young doctors avoid facing their own feelings about death, finding them stressful.¹ When patients die we are perhaps reminded of the certainty of our own deaths.

In 1915 Freud² wrote: ‘Our own death is indeed unimaginable . . . at bottom no-one believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in another way, in the unconscious everyone of us is convinced of his own immortality’. An inability to acknowledge death in a personal sense may account in part for our difficulty in approaching the subject³ and everybody has some degree of anxiety about death.⁴ This comes in part from the irreversibility of death, and in part from the impossibility of that experience being conveyed to others.⁵

We live in a society that rejects death, and doctors may have a greater need than others to do so.⁶ Some authors suggest that doctors may compensate for their unconscious personal fear of illness and death by using distancing tactics⁷ and other mechanisms in attempts to protect themselves through a process of mastery by becoming doctors.⁸

In medical training it is necessary for medical students to develop technical skills necessary to deal efficiently with illness. During this period, however, and without appropriate training and acknowledgment of the feelings elicited by medical work, it is likely that responses harmful to both doctor and patients will develop. Werner and Korsch⁹ describe this process and show how spending time with a supportive group can help medical students become aware of the ways in which their own reactions can interfere with the effective treatment of patients.

It has been shown, however, that first year medical students did not differ from non-medical students in their attitudes towards death before they had direct clinical experience with dying patients.¹⁰ Later on in their clinical studies medical students became more preoccupied with thoughts about their own deaths and the possible physical pain of dying, as well as about the breaking up of relationships as a result of someone else’s death.¹¹ Death and some of the processes of dying may contradict the doctor’s concept of his professional purpose,¹² and the death of a patient may be viewed as professional failure and generate guilt.¹³

Though in the past doctors tended to avoid breaking bad news to patients and their families, nowadays it is generally accepted that truthful information should be shared with them.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ When children are concerned doctors are particularly ill prepared. For example Stein et al found that families in which there was a child with a life threatening illness remembered vividly the manner in which the diagnosis was imparted, and only about half the parents interviewed were satisfied with the way they had been told (Stein A, Woolley H, Forrest G, Baum JD. Imparting the diagnosis of life threatening illness. Paper presented at British Paediatric Association, York 1988).

Although doctors cannot prepare themselves for all possible circumstances that might arise regarding death and dying, some sort of preparation is necessary before a consultation with the family of a dying patient. A review of the cumulative Index Medicus heading ‘Death’ from 1960 to 1971 showed not one article about the teaching of medical students about death and dying.⁶ Barton was one of the first authors to report his experience of working with groups of students on this issue.³ He met groups of six to 10 students for one to two hours, and tried to focus their attention on death and dying and to examine and rationalise their personal feelings and attitudes towards the psychological and sociocultural issues that are an integral part of the care of patients with life threatening illnesses. In 1973, Liston reported that since the late 1960s about half the medical schools in the United States had included some formal teaching on death and dying in the curriculum,¹⁷ and by 1980, 104 out of 114 (92%) medical schools in the United States had courses about death and dying.¹⁸ In England in 1983 only four of 62 medical schools reported the absence of a programme for medical students on death and
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At the Royal Free Hospital, JN, together with a psychiatric registrar and social worker, organised seminars for first year clinical medical students from University College Hospital on how to talk with dying patients and their families. Their only formal teaching on this subject is two talks of one hour each during the introductory course and before their preclinical attachments.

We offered this because the one and a half hours allocated to the teaching of interviewing skills was not adequate to cover this topic, and because the students expressed concern at the lack of teaching about death and dying; their theoretical knowledge helped little when talking to 'real' patients, and they felt overwhelmed by their own feelings when trying to talk about dying with patients and their families. Our aim then was to help medical students develop skills for dealing with dying patients and their families.

After discussion between the Dean of the medical school and the consultant child psychiatrists, a group of 20 third year students was offered an optional extra three hour teaching session led by two teachers. Preparatory meetings usually resulted in personal and professional bereavements being discussed; it was thought that this was likely to happen with the students too, and extra time was allowed for this. Little theory was offered but a leaflet, reading list, and two articles were given out at the end.

In the introduction, normal grieving was described and students asked to describe their own experiences since being on the ward. They talked readily about the discomfort and anxiety they felt, and drew up a list of distancing tactics, together with their thoughts about why they might be used. They were asked how they would like to talk to patients and their families. What factors would they want to take into account and what would they not want to do?

In the first section, the students played the part of a doctor telling a patient about her terminal illness. They were told 'she has six months to live' as, without that, discussion of the patient's imminent death could easily be avoided. The encounter was recorded on video tape and reviewed together after 10 minutes. Distancing tactics immediately became apparent and were discussed in the review. The students were often shocked by their emotional responses and were also able to get some idea of a patient's reaction to what they had said. Reviews of each session were necessary to avoid any student being left in the uncomfortable part of a dying patient.

The next section began with a talk on family reactions to loss and the mechanisms used to avoid facing the death—ones that doctors may easily and
unwittingly use themselves. A short ‘play’ in which everyone who took part was performed, in which a family was visited in turn by a general practitioner, a vicar, a neighbour, and a relative after a sudden recent bereavement. The students were able to see how families rearrange themselves and roles change quickly to fill the gap left by the dead person. Older children take on the part of a parent if an adult dies, and younger children are often ignored. Students found this approach powerful, and it often led to discussion of personal losses and unresolved grief. In the reviews of the sessions their own responses and personal experiences were shared, and the application of such sessions to their clinical work was discussed.

Responses by students

Attendance at the seminars was voluntary; the group was therefore self selected and the number variable. Almost 100 students attended over two years, the ratio of women to men being 5:1. Those who attended and filled in evaluation forms found it helpful and requested more. Typical responses were: ‘Though terrifying, the role-play helped me to see a bit of what it felt like to be a patient.’ ‘I never realised how little a patient could take in of what I was saying.’ ‘It will make it easier to talk to patients about what they are feeling.

Such experiences are not yet recognised as being necessary in the training of medical students and the courses stopped when JN moved to another post. If formally integrated into the teaching, it would be possible to measure its effects accurately, and find out whether those medical students with more training in this area experience less stress when they become junior doctors.

The value of a single teaching session is bound to be limited and it was frustrating for the teachers not to be able to see the students again. A regular series of meetings might have been more helpful so that individual patients could be discussed in detail and an attempt made to integrate the social, psychological, and medical aspects of death and dying.

Discussion

In the early 1970s most of the courses on death and dying were given in the preclinical years, and the preferred time to approach the subject was during courses in anatomy and pathology, thus preparing students for the clinical years when they would meet patients with terminal illnesses. Linn et al suggested that because there was no difference in students' attitudes towards death and dying in preclinical and clinical years it would be more appropriate for these special subjects to be taught during the clinical years when the students actually experienced circumstances of death and dying. As with the teaching of physical examination (which is done in small groups with self examination before the actual examination of patients) Liston recommended that students should not first learn about death and dying during bedside teaching. Both formal lectures given by experts from different disciplines and small group discussions are needed for a comprehensive approach.

From our experience in working with students on this subject we would like to recommend that each course should have the following objectives:

- To identify the dying patient's needs and wishes
- To understand the family's needs
- To recognise the phases of normal grief and mourning
- To be aware of cultural and religious aspects with regard to death and the roles of other people, such as chaplains, in caring for the person and the family
- To clear away the barriers that have been erected around the subject
- To make the student appreciate his or her own death, thus contributing to his or her emotional development
- To appreciate the need to relieve the physical and emotional distress of the dying patient
- To consider ethical issues such as euthanasia, abortion, organ transplantation, and so on.

Different educational methods could be used in these courses, including formal lectures, discussions, interviews with patients, video tape illustrations of particular events, actors simulating patients and family members, students playing different parts, and students being assigned to a dying patient and his family until the death and for some time during the period of bereavement.

We suggest that the best time to offer such a course is in the clinical years when students have had some experience of clinical work. We recommend that no course be less than six hours and that teachers may come from any discipline but share an ability to communicate the skills of a clinician in reaching out to families in distress.

Conclusion

There is no one way leading to death, and there is no one way of teaching students how to approach the issues of death and dying. The removal of the taboos about death, however, and the development of a structured comprehensive educational programme for medical students on terminal care, death, and
dying in different stages of their studies, will improve the future physicians’ skills in handling delicate and sensitive moments in their patients’ lives.

There is still a danger that our medical training is teaching us that our tools are more important than we are. By encouraging the acquisition of technical skills and factual knowledge but undervaluing our human reactions to the people we meet, medicine can become a dehumanising process rather than one in which our human qualities can be used in conjunction with our technical knowledge to offer patients and their families a complete rather than a compartmentalised treatment.

We thank Sebastian Kraemer and Janis Kavanagh for their support, and Jane Rayner for typing the manuscript. The study was carried out while Dr Hardoff (consultant paediatrician, University of Haifa Medical School, Israel) was a World Health Organisation Honorary Clinical Research Fellow, at the Royal Free Hospital, September–December 1987.

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Educating medical students about death and dying.

D Black, D Hardoff and J Nelki

Arch Dis Child 1989 64: 750-753
doi: 10.1136/adc.64.5.750