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The full report is titled “Hope, Truth, and Preparing for Death: Perspectives of Surrogate Decision Makers.” It is in the 16 December 2008 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine* (volume 149, pages 861-868). The report was written by L. Apatira, E.A. Boyd, G. Malvar, L.R. Evans, J.M. Luce, B. Lo, and D.B. White.

Family Members’ Opinions about Sharing Bad News

What is the problem and what is known about it so far?

Doctors sometimes have difficulty breaking bad news to patients and their family members. Some doctors are concerned that sharing bad news with a patient will take away most or all of the patient’s hope for survival. In instances when patients are too sick to discuss their situation with their doctors, doctors discuss the patient’s condition with family members. Little is known about family members’ preferences for hearing bad news from their relative’s doctors.

Why did the researchers do this particular study?

To assess family members’ preferences for hearing bad news from their relative’s doctors.

Who was studied?

179 family members of seriously ill patients hospitalized in intensive care units at a hospital in San Francisco, California.

How was the study done?

In face-to-face interviews, the researchers asked the family members if they thought it was all right for doctors to withhold bad news to maintain their hope.

What did the researchers find?

Nearly all of the family members said that withholding bad news was not an acceptable way to maintain their hope. Many thought that sharing bad news would help them prepare for their relative’s death and for the future and support each other. Others said they relied on doctors for the truth about their relative’s medical condition. They relied on other sources, such as God or religion, for hope.

What were the limitations of the study?

The researchers only assessed family members’ attitudes. They did not look at the results of sharing or withholding bad news.

What are the implications of the study?

Most relatives of sick family members want doctors to share bad news with them so they can prepare for their family members’ death.

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