Breaking bad news to families is one of the most difficult yet rarely discussed topics in medicine.1

“Bad news” can be broadly defined as information that may alter a patient’s or parent’s view of the future, information related to a chronic disease, a life-altering illness or an injury leading to a significant change in quality of life.2

Impediments to successful conversations include differences in family preferences, cultural barriers, and physician discomfort.2 There are many specific challenges for anesthesiologists, including limited preoperative interactions with family members, production pressure, and medicolegal concerns.3

Anesthesiologists are also at risk for psychological and professional consequences after an adverse patient event. Departmental support and protected debriefing are essential to avoid feelings of guilt, anxiety, and burnout.3

Crucial aspects that lead to positive interactions include 1. collaborative, family-centered communication; 2. avoiding the appearance of paternalism (providing selected information); 3. clear content and approach to the conversation.4

There are several protocols and mnemonics to guide the delivery of bad news, such as ABCDE, BREAKS, and SPIKES.2 SPIKES is the most adaptable protocol for the pediatric setting.4

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<th>STEP</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATION</th>
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| SETTING | • Determine who will be present  
• Establish whether the patient will participate in the meeting and arrange for child life presence  
• Arrange for a private room and limit interruptions |
| PERCEPTION | • Use open ended questions to explore what the family already knows  
• Correct misinformation  
• Identify unrealistic expectations |
| INVOLVEMENT | • Determine the level of detail that the parents and patient want  
• Encourage questions and comments  
• Be sensitive to the family’s culture, race, religious beliefs and background |
| KNOWLEDGE | • Briefly summarize events to this point  
• Stop often to confirm understanding  
• Use nonmedical terms and avoid jargon |
| EMOTION | • Use empathetic responses to the family’s observed emotional response  
• Use exploratory questions to clarify thoughts and feelings  
• Validate responses to help the family realize their feelings are important |
| SUMMARY | • Summarize the news  
• Verify that the family understands the treatment plan  
• Balance hope with realism  
• Set a plan for follow-up |

References: