

## The Importance of Cultural Factors in Sharing Cancer News and Information With Patients and Their Families in Iran

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### DEAR EDITOR,

Cancer is a life-threatening disease that has negative effects on the physical, psychological, social, economic, and spiritual aspects of patients and their families [1]. Cancer diagnosis puts the patient and family in a state of “existential crisis.” The existential crisis is about the first hundred days after the diagnosis in which patients and their families worry about life and death. During the existential crisis, patients and their families reach the peak of vulnerability. Their existence and way of life are endangered and many of them will look for a meaning to attribute to the disease according to their reasons [2]. Family attitude towards the disease, its symptoms, and its complications has special effects

on patient care, thus, one of the main care policies for the family is to gain more knowledge and understanding of the disease process and treatment. Therefore, many psycho-oncologists consider cancer as a familial disease [3]. The main burden of caring for cancer patients is on their families and that’s why the family experiences the pressure of care. The caregiving burden means psychological, physical, and social pressures that the caregivers experience while taking care of chronic patients. As a result, they usually experience many problems such as burnout, anxiety, and depression [4]. Iranian families have an important role in caring for patients and sometimes they play a greater role than patients in deciding whether to adherence or withdraw from the treatment. For example, many families believe that disclosing cancer news or information causes anxiety and frustration for patients. However, a national survey of cancer centers across Iran revealed that most cancer patients desired to receive information about their disease; while less than half of the study population were aware of their condition [5].

Also, in our clinical experience, we confronted cases whose families had hidden the news and information about cancer (about the advanced phase of cancer) from both the patients and the other family members, so that they carry the entire burden of care alone. By doing so, they don’t want to destroy the patient’s spirit and the mental condition of family members [4]. Sometimes, the patient keeps the

disease update secret from family members. Perhaps one of the reasons is the fear of worrying others and destroying the normal course of their lives. Some patients also feel guilty because they may consider themselves the cause of their illness and do not want to worry others [6]. It seems that patient and family culture plays an important role in this concealment. Cultural factors have a very important impact on the treatment process [7]. Every culture has specific views, behaviors, and beliefs that not only affect the lifestyle and worldview of individuals but also their attitude toward health and illness [8]. Every culture has beliefs about the causes of the disease, the type of treatment, the degree of family involvement in the treatment process, etc. Sometimes these cultural beliefs interfere with informing about cancer, and dialogue between practitioners and patients and their families. The patient personal independence is also directly related to his or her culture and family [9]. Since in the oncology and cancer support care, observing the principle of respecting the personal independence of patients and the principle of not harming the patient are important ethical principles in approaching the disease, information transparency is one of the important ethical and therapeutic factors. It is noteworthy that many factors in practitioners like critical thinking play an important role in patients and their families. Critical thinking is one of the remarkable determinants; influencing human thinking ability and plays an important role in obtaining, evaluating, and effectively using information [10]. In a country like Iran, which has a long-standing cultural diversity, it is necessary to consider cultural factors such as socio-economic level, and beliefs content related to a healthy state. In summary, it is suggested that the following factors be considered in the interaction between the medical staff and patients and their families:

- Increasing understanding of the cultural, social, emotional, and financial status of the patient and family through medical staff training;
- Pay attention to the literacy and information of the patient and family about cancer, and provide the essential training if necessary;

- Proper understanding of the patient's expectations and his perception about his medical condition;
- Clear explanation of the treatment process for patients and their families;
- Consider the religious and spiritual beliefs of patients and families about illness and health; and
- Teaching critical thinking to treatment staff to improve information delivery and better communication with the client.

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