BREAKING BAD NEWS  -  A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

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The degree of information received by terminal cancer patients about their illness varies across different countries. In USA, the majority of doctors indicated a preference for truth telling. However, some cultures perceive the disclosure as a harmful act violating the principle of non-maleficence. Many Chinese families object to let the patient know the diagnosis or prognosis, and some experts recommended to respect the wish of the family. However, in a population study in Hong Kong by R Fielding in 1996, the majority of those interviewed wanted information even if the news was bad. Thus, the existing empirical evidence for the Chinese showed contrasting attitudes among the medical profession, the family members and the individuals. This paper attempts to analyze the ethical principles for and against disclosure, taking into account the views in Chinese philosophy, sociological studies, and writings in traditional Chinese medicine. Gaps in our knowledge are identified, and the following pragmatic approach for the Chinese is recommended before better knowledge is available from future studies:

Truth telling should depend on what the patient wants to know and is prepared to know, and not on what the family wants to disclose. The standard palliative care approach to breaking bad news should be basically adopted, but with modifications to address the "family determination" and "death as taboo" issues.