



# THE ONE THING YOUR DOCTOR SHOULD NEVER DO



Cathy O'Brien 1/2025

“Words are of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.”

Rudyard Kipling

It's not what you say but how you say it

It wasn't long ago that doctors believed it was better for a patient not to tell them bad news believing that it would **worsen** their condition. In the late 1970's that changed when the practice of medicine began to recognize the patients right to know their medical situation allowing them to make a more informed decision about their treatment. That pendulum has swung again. They were kind-of right both times, bad news could seemingly cause the patient to get worse and patients do have a right to know the truth about their conditions. Today it's believed that the mind body connection coupled with our bodies innate ability to heal itself plays a huge role in our health and healing. One of the most obvious tools to enhance this aspect of the process is the power of the WORD to convey positive messaging and instill hope, but that's not typically what patients experience. Doctors admittedly are not trained to communicate but a callous bed side manner is just lazy and can do a lot of harm. There's actually a word for this it's called "nocebo" the reverse of placebo. In essence your body metabolizes bad news and becomes sicker, or it metabolizes good news and starts to heal. Ethical disclosure doesn't need to be brutal, the shock your body feels hearing derogatory news is negatively affecting billions of cells in your body making it even harder to heal.

My Daughters Experience

My daughter was in her early 20's when she was hospitalized with symptoms of a stroke. After a grueling week of test's her neurologist informed her of her diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. He then ran down the list of all the possible symptoms and that there was no cure. He ended by advising her that she will probably be spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair and that

getting ready now for the eventual outcome would be a good idea. While that might have been his reality its not the only version of this disease and hasn't been my daughters experience. We now know that how you view your reality has the ability to shape it to some extent and him imposing his negative vision was not helpful. Yes, some people experience the worst case of this disease but just as many have minor or no symptoms or, why lead with the worst? I named him Dr Doom..... on a scale of 1-10 I would describe my daughters MS at a level 3 MS with very few symptoms (divorce and deaths being the situational exceptions). Doctors are not God and they need to be aware of the power their words have to either heal or do harm.

### Change is Coming

Obviously, there are good doctors who are acutely aware of these problems and are trying to be a part of the change. One of my favorite examples of this is Dr Milton Ericson who as a child was diagnosed with polio. Ericson overheard the conversation where his doctor told his mother that his diagnosis was so serious that it was likely that "would not see the sun rise", Even as a child Ericson knew what that meant. He was so angry at hearing that prognosis that he decided to prove him wrong. He went onto become a psychiatrist who would intentionally write in a patient's chart "Doing Well" and then leave the room, expecting his patient to look at the chart. All those years later he never forgot the impact his doctor's words.

A recent study of professional education discussed the importance of psychological factors in the healing process while acknowledging the fact that biomedical issues still account for more than 99% of all undergraduate health care training. Change isn't easy for any of us why should doctors be any different. Many people believe we are on the precipice of a new era of health care at least that's how Doctor Andrew Weill sees it, he describes a psychosocialspiritual approach to medicine where body, mind, spirit and society are finally starting to acknowledge the need for doctors to have a broader basis of information and higher consciousness. I hope he's right. Until that change happens patients have a right to be respected and heard in their healing process but what if you are still dealing with a doctor from the old school? Some are open to listening others not so much so you have to be willing to find a doctor who embodies a more evolved consciousness but where? Integrative medicine is one place to look as it focuses on treating the whole person with an emphasis on prevention, selfcare, and the body's natural healing abilities. I want a doctor who will offer me reassurance in a tense situation it helps me remember that I am loved, respected and valued, I don't think that's asking a lot