

Balancing Optimism and Empathy: Lessons from a Granddaughter and Future Physician

By Hanna Denek

We are fortunate to have a close-knit family, spending every holiday in the same living room, going on annual summer vacations, or camping together. My grandparents had four children and many grandchildren, so we always had big gatherings at their house growing up. Earlier this year, I spent the last few days of my grandpa's life with him and our family in the hospital. It was fitting that, in his last days, we managed to fill that small ICU room with many family members, laughing and reminiscing on all our wonderful memories. My grandpa loved football, so we also watched the Chiefs win, again, securing their place in Super Bowl 59. I am so grateful to the nurses and hospital staff that let us all be together in those moments, overlooking the ICU rule of only two visitors at a time.

The next morning, we received a call just before 5am from the nurses, suggesting that we all come back. And as my grandpa entered the active stages of dying, I wanted nothing more than reassurance that he was comfortable and safe. My grandpa passed away just an hour later, and we were fortunate to have all 20 of us squeezed into his room, sharing those precious last moments.

Even though this time felt so special with my grandpa, I felt an internal conflict of trying to enjoy the time together with family while watching and feeling the heaviness of the situation.

After having some time to reflect and process, I have come to realize that I grappled with both being a family member and picturing myself as a doctor: the dichotomy of what I wanted to hear versus what I needed to hear. How will I handle the delicate balance of optimism and honesty in the midst of painful circumstances as a future physician?

I struggled with wanting to hear that he could still be okay yet recognized that his condition was deteriorating. I am just a second-year medical student, but with my limited knowledge, I watched his hemoglobin levels and kidney function drop regardless of how many units of blood he received, and I knew he would continue to decline. I can only imagine how intimidating it must feel as a doctor to walk into a tension-filled room to have a hard conversation when all you want is to have good news.

Is it compassionate to maintain too much optimism in the face of suboptimal conditions? As both a medical student seeing him get sicker and his granddaughter wanting to hear positive news for recovery, I got a taste for this harmony that exists in a doctor/patient relationship. As a family member, I needed a physician who could empathize with us and meet us where we were emotionally. How can a provider remain optimistic when someone is dying? While optimism is a good thing, there are different forms that are required for different situations, and I will make it a goal of mine to meet my patients and their family members where they are at.

This experience had a profound impact on me, highlighting the importance of difficult conversations and empathy. Sometimes the most compassionate thing to say isn't necessarily the most optimistic. There is a delicate balance between optimism and true compassion, with imbalance creating strife between a doctor who wants to remain positive and a family needing

support. I think the key to determining where the balance is starts with having a real discussion with the patient and family to ensure that everyone's needs are fulfilled.

When I become a doctor, I will ensure that I do not shy away from these hard conversations. I always knew that giving difficult news was a part of medicine, but I don't think I fully understood just how important it is. Transparent and honest communication about a patient's condition is crucial, even when the news is not ideal. It allows families to prepare emotionally and make necessary arrangements, providing a sense of closure that is invaluable during such challenging times.

In those last few days, surrounded by family, sharing memories, drinking "diet coke-y pops" (grandpa's favorite), and laughing together, I learned that the most impactful aspects of care extend beyond medical interventions. I realize, now, that the time spent in that little ICU room gave me a little glimpse into the relationship that a doctor shares with their patient, and I will keep that with me as I continue through my education and learning. It is the emotional support, honesty, and compassion that truly make a difference. Having hard conversations is uncomfortable; but we as future physicians will have the responsibility to be there for our patients and their family members when those conversations need to be had. As a future doctor, I am committed to embodying these principles, ensuring that I provide not just medical care but empathetic and honest communication in vulnerable moments.