
DEALING WITH THE PRESS AND RELATIVES AFTER A CALAMITOUS EXPERIENCE LIKE ENDOPTHALMITIS

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In any society, it is the duty of either the government or the press to inform the people at large about the incidents happening in the society and to bring various dangers to the attention of the people. In the good old days there were ruler's declarations and mouth to mouth spread of news, and with the advent of printing and better transmission of news from far distant places, the news papers were born, and reading of newspapers has become part of modern human life. With the technological advances in fields of audiovisual, telecommunication and electronics, the gathering of the news and spreading to the remotest corner of the world takes a fraction of a second. Though the aim of providing these kinds of services may be very beneficial to the society at large, to be in race of one above the others and to make news more sensational, the presentation of facts have become corrupted to some extent

No doubt, in major mishaps, in the field of Medicine when a medical person is involved, any bad publicity may harm his long built professional reputation and practice. It is a most uphill task, in most difficult circumstances for a medical person to defend himself and provide clear, transparent and honest information to the press. He has been hit with his hands tied at his back and with little chance to provide explanation; this coupled with the natural sympathy of society to sufferers (without any knowledge of medical uncertainties and unpredictability) often means that he is condemned even without a hearing.

Even convincing the press about the matter and proving one's innocence may not repair the damage done by the impact and sensationalism generated by the first news. Remember the press needs to keep the issue alive for the news. If you wish to close the matter, it is in best interest of all, not to go on issuing various clarifications and counter allegations. The value of news is only for that particular day for masses, only your well wishers and foes will cherish the memories of the news for long time to come and to use to malign you at the most suitable time.

In any major medical calamity, the most anxious, worried and in physical agony is the patient, not aware of situation and future problems of complications, and a number of all relatives and well wishers either due to genuine feeling, or, of social reasons, in pursuit of facts of the problem, will be on the heels of all medical personnel concerned with number of questions of varying intelligence, with multiple repetitions.

The gathered knowledge will be used by these same relatives to cross examine the doctor and raise more questions to try and predict (unrealistically) the prognosis of the patient. There are extensive (though perhaps unintentional) efforts by all concerned to irritate the medical personnel concerned and most feel a sadistic pleasure at their sufferings except for a few who will understand their difficulties. In such a situation the doctor concerned no doubt feels he is surrounded by a hostile crowd, cross-examined by number of non-medical persons, with shivering thoughts of the consumer court and a hanging sword of the press over his head, and I feel he should have the Almighty and few friends to guide him from utter chaos and confusion and give him moral and professional help to treat his patients.

I have thought about few points how to handle such situations, though, I wish and pray that none of my colleagues ever has to face such situations.

"The foregoing shows that the key to happiness lies in the worship of truth, which is the giver of all things."

(M.K.GANDHI., January 7th 1945).

This statement by Gandhi summarizes the approach to be taken when one is faced with a ophthalmological calamity like a series of endophthalmitis cases. When a problem has occurred do not try to run away from the truth. Admit that a problem has occurred and try and find solutions.

The role of the press is:

1. To inform about events to public at large.
2. To warn about possible dangers.

This is a social service that the press does and it does it well with wide coverage. If this is so, then why are we scared of the press ?

This is because we are afraid of:

1. Wrong publicity
2. Wide coverage
3. The press may not publish all facts the way in which we like.
4. There may be a distortion of facts.
5. Misunderstanding of the facts by people.
6. The news that we have gone wrong somewhere is hurtful for the ego.

So how should we deal with the press:

- Stick to the facts.
- Make the episode quite transparent.
- Talk to many reporters.
- Explain the unfortunate incident.
- Try to simplify the medical complexities.
- Allow the press to visit the patients.

- Do not accuse anybody.
- Do not answer the questions you do not know.
- Keep records of what you say.
- Answer softly and firmly without getting excited.
- Some of the questions you may not like, but still answer them in the most polite way.
- Some questions are to excite or irritate you, take your time, take a deep breath and answer softly.
- Have few friends with you.
- Request if possible that the press show you their impression before it is published.
- Explain in most simplified words what has happened and whatever possible you are doing.
- Do not reject the request for second opinion and try to help him.
- Listen to all his suggestions too.
- Visit him frequently and chat him up.
- Examine him more frequently, and pay more attention to him.
- If he requests for another eye surgeons' advise, help him out rather than brushing off his request.

Now let us look at the patients' side of things: The patients are in pain & agony, they are depressed and worried and sometimes even hostile. What they want to know is:

1. What is the problem?
2. How are you dealing with the problem?
3. What about the vision?

Understand that the bond of faith & trust which existed between you & your patient, is fractured now, and, there is mistrust and loss of confidence between you & your patient .

How do you deal with the patient?

- Keep cool and be patient and a good listener.
- Try to answer all the questions.

The Relatives: are the biggest problem. Their numbers are unlimited. They are of differing intellectual capacity, and want to know the complete ophthalmology in the shortest time. They are likely to disturb you at odd times, different relatives keep repeating the same questions, and one keeps getting suggestions for consultations with different eye surgeons.

Some 'intellectual' relatives are satisfied with their questions only and don't really listen to your answers.

At such times be guided by another of Gandhi's pithy statements,

"Nothing is ever achieved without toil, that is, without TAPA (Penance). How, then, can self-purification be possible without it ?"

Dealing with the relatives, and the press is one such penance. Only by going through with it does one emerge a more complete ophthalmologist.

Henry de Mondeville, [1260-1320]

The surgeon should be fairly audacious [yet] he should operate with prudence and sagacity; he should never commence perilous operations unless he has provided everything in order to avoid danger; ...he should not sing his own praises; he should not cover his colleagues with blame; he should not cause envy among them; he should work always with the idea of acquiring a reputation of probity; he should be reassuring to his patients by kind words and acquiesce to their requests when nothing harmful will result from them as to their cure.