

# Assessing the Training Needs Regarding ‘Breaking Bad News’ amongst Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Professionals in Pune India

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** ‘Breaking Bad News’ (BBN) in the scenario of poor prognosis or death is considered to be one of the most stressful aspects of the duties of a Healthcare professional. In the recent years, the subject of BBN has gained traction among healthcare professionals and psychologist leading to the creation of some comprehensive models to train professionals. Emergency Medical Professionals are among the likeliest to encounter BBN situations. Hence it is imperative that they be formally trained to deal with patients and their families effectively

**Objective:** To assess the training needs regarding ‘Breaking Bad News’ (BBN); amongst Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Professionals.

**Methodology:** The study was conducted amongst 150 Emergency Medical Professionals in Pune, India. A previously tested and validated questionnaire developed by Rasmus *etal* in June 2020 was utilized for the study. Questionnaire was administered to the respondents through online mode after obtaining informed consent. Responding to all questions was mandatory. The respondents were given one day to fill the questionnaire. Any queries pertaining to questionnaire were clarified during data collection.

**Discussion:** The present study was done to assess the baseline awareness of EMS professionals about BBN and to devise a customized training program for them. Unfortunately, majority of the respondents were not even aware that BBN is a separate subject having specific procedures and protocols followed globally. The lack of training instils fear of facing such situations and adversely affects the mental health of EMS professionals. This can be corrected by utilizing tools like simulation and role play to provide adequate exposure to EMS professionals in a safe environment.

**Conclusion:** The findings of the study point towards an emergent need of formal practical training on this crucial yet ignored aspect of the health care professionals’ duties. Comparative Studies can be conducted in the future to assess the effectiveness of this training program.

**Keywords:** *Breaking Bad News (BBN), Emergency Medical Services (EMS) professionals, Formal training, Training Needs*

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## Introduction

‘Breaking Bad News’ (BBN) in the scenario of poor prognosis or death is considered to be one of the most stressful aspects of the duties of a Healthcare

professional. Unfortunately, the healthcare education curriculum does not provide for formal training regarding effective communication with the patient and/or caregivers.<sup>1</sup>

A study in 2010 conducted amongst physician and nurses in Iran by Arbabi *etal*<sup>2</sup>, concluded that lack of adequate communication skills among healthcare professionals leads to inertia in disclosing bad news to the patients or their relatives. This was partly attributed to the fear of managing the adverse emotional reaction of the patients' or caregivers after listening to bad news.

In the recent years, the subject of BBN has gained traction among healthcare professionals and psychologist leading to the creation of some comprehensive models to train professionals. A few of these models that has gained popularity include the ABCDE model developed by Rabow and Mcphee. This acronym stands for Advance preparation, Building a therapeutic relationship or environment, communicating well, Dealing with patient and family reactions, and Encouraging and validating emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Another model called SPIKES has been recognized in standard guidelines in numerous countries.<sup>4,5</sup> The model consists of six steps including: Setting up the interview, assessing patient's Perception, obtaining Patient's information, Providing, Knowledge and information to the patient; addressing the patient's Emotions with empathic responses and Strategy and Summary<sup>4</sup>.

Although these models offer a structured approach for healthcare professionals to adopt, their utilization has been abysmally low. One way to improve their utilization is to sensitise healthcare professionals on the significance of effective communication during an adverse outcome. Physician and caregiver surveys have highlighted the importance of upfront and honest communication while delivering bad news<sup>6,7,8</sup>

Within the healthcare cadre, Emergency Medical Professionals are among the likeliest to encounter

BBN situations. Hence, it is imperative that they be formally trained to deal with patients and their families effectively.<sup>9</sup>The first step in this direction is to assess the training needs to help tailor practical training program based on recognized protocols.

**Objective:** To assess the training needs regarding 'Breaking Bad News' (BBN); amongst Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Professionals.

## Methodology

The study was conducted amongst 150 Emergency Medical Professionals in Pune, India. A previously tested and validated questionnaire developed by Rasmus *etal*<sup>9</sup> in June 2020 was utilized for the study.

The original questionnaire comprised of two sections wherein the first section recorded sociodemographic information. The second section consisted of 7 items pertaining to the exposure of the respondents in BBN.

Of the 7 items 3 were required to be answered in a binary Yes/No and the remaining 4 items were in the format of Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ).

Questionnaire was administered to the respondents through online mode after obtaining informed consent. Responding to all questions was mandatory. The respondents were given one day to fill the questionnaire. Any queries pertaining to questionnaire were clarified during data collection.

All 150 respondents reverted with the completely filled questionnaire. The data was tabulated and statistically analysed with the help SPSS version 23.

## Results

On the basis of the demographic findings, it was seen that the average respondents were between the age group of 21-25 years with 84% female majority. Further, 42% were BHMS graduates and more than 93% of the respondents had a work experience of 1-5 years.

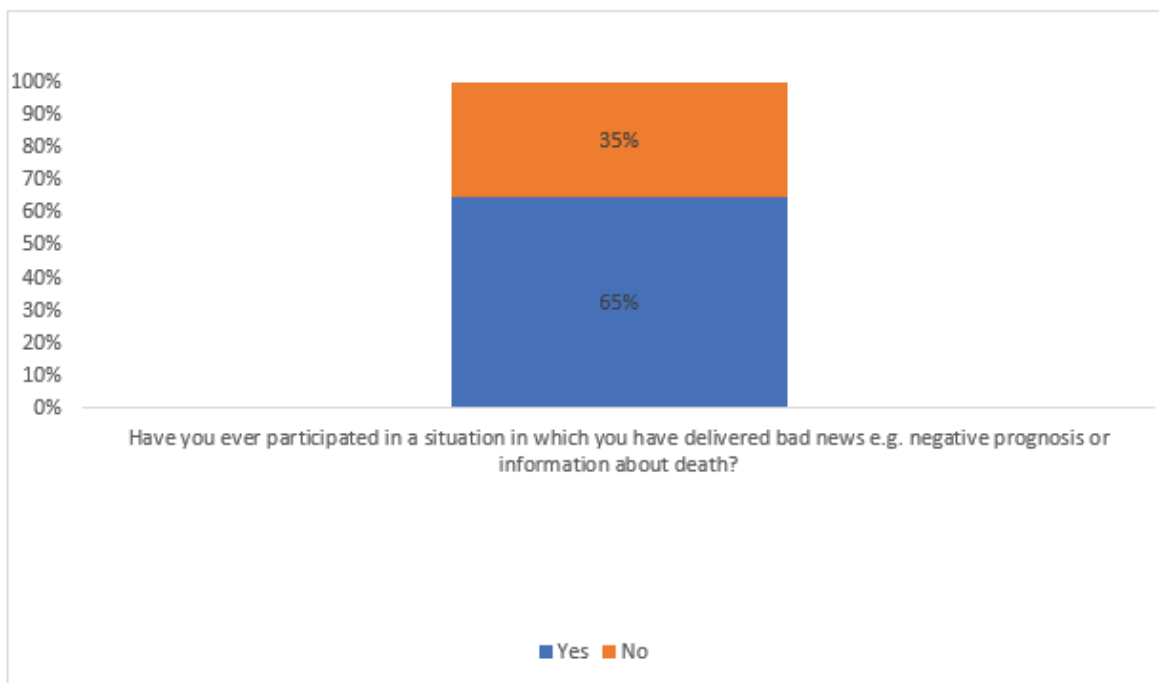


Figure 1.

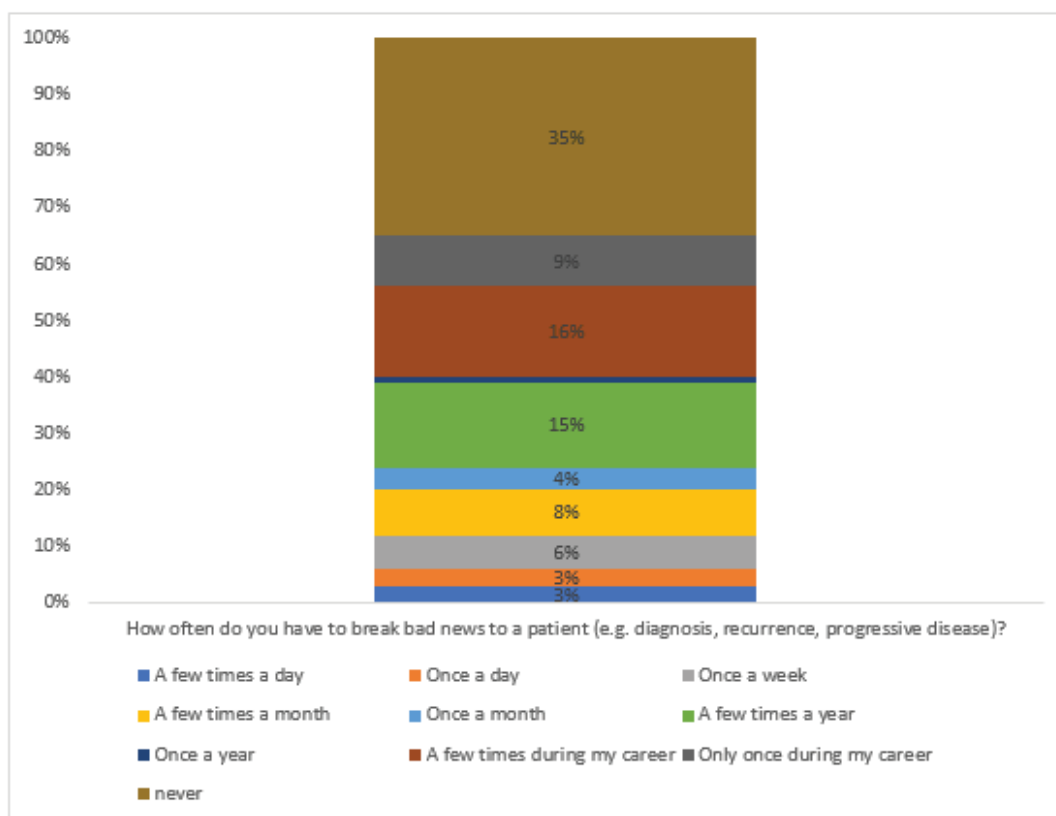
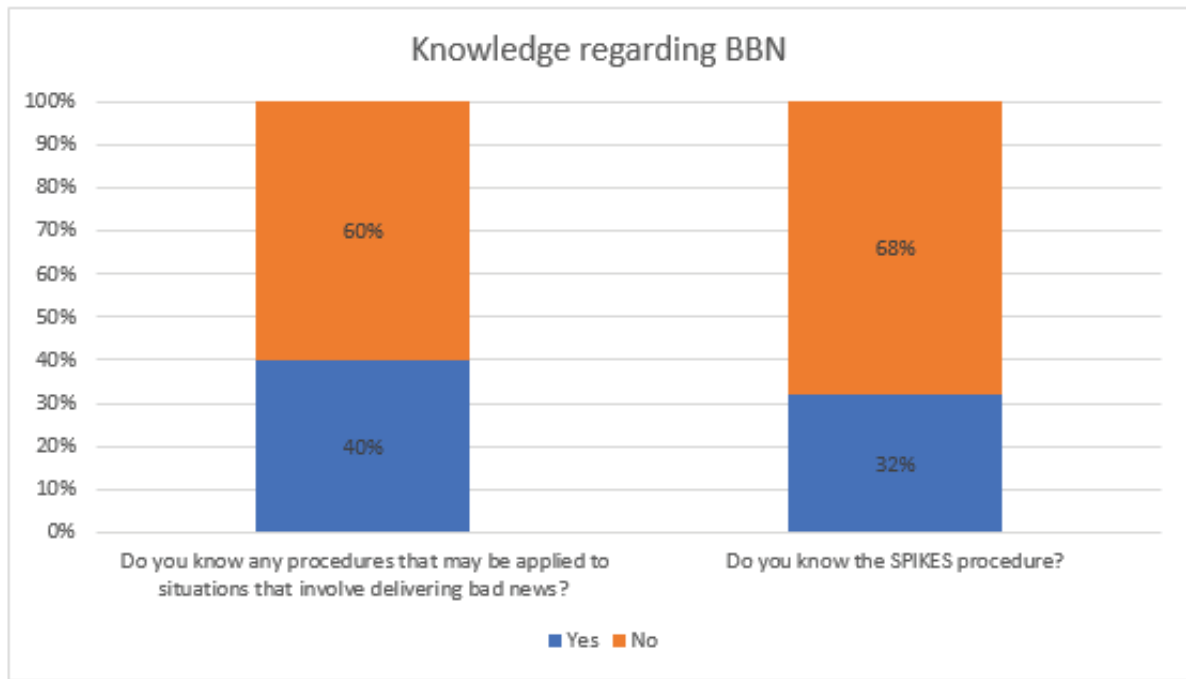


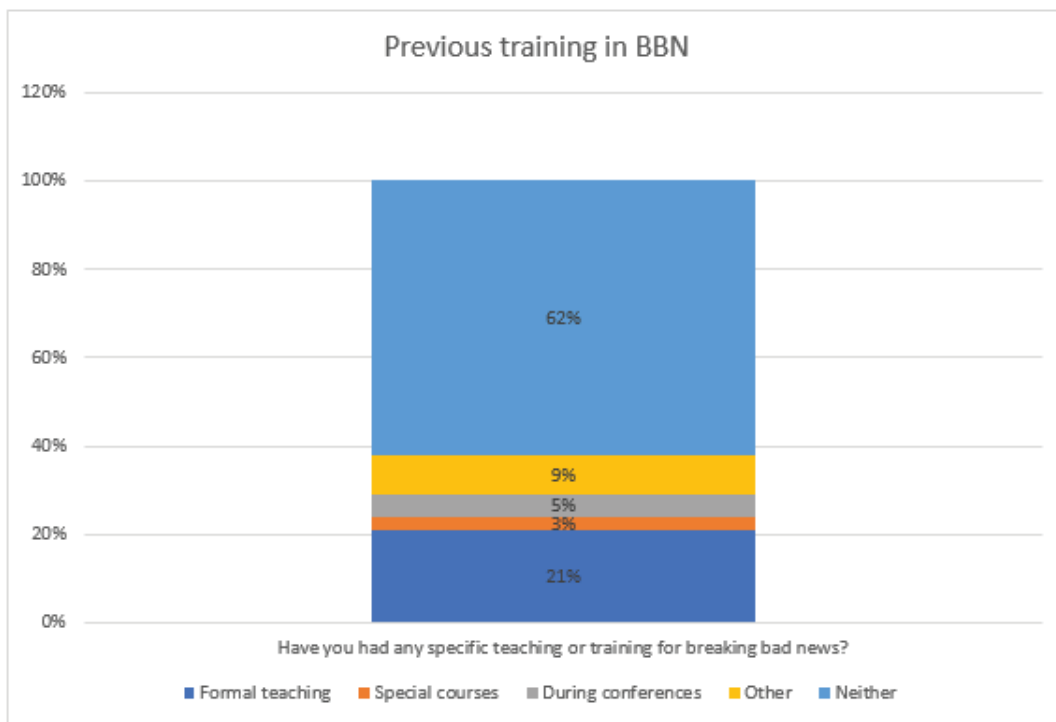
Figure 2

As seen in figure 1 and 2, 3%% of the respondents had never participated in a situation in which they had to deliver poor prognosis or news regarding death of a patient. Within the rest nearly 50% of the respondents had to face BBN situations regularly.



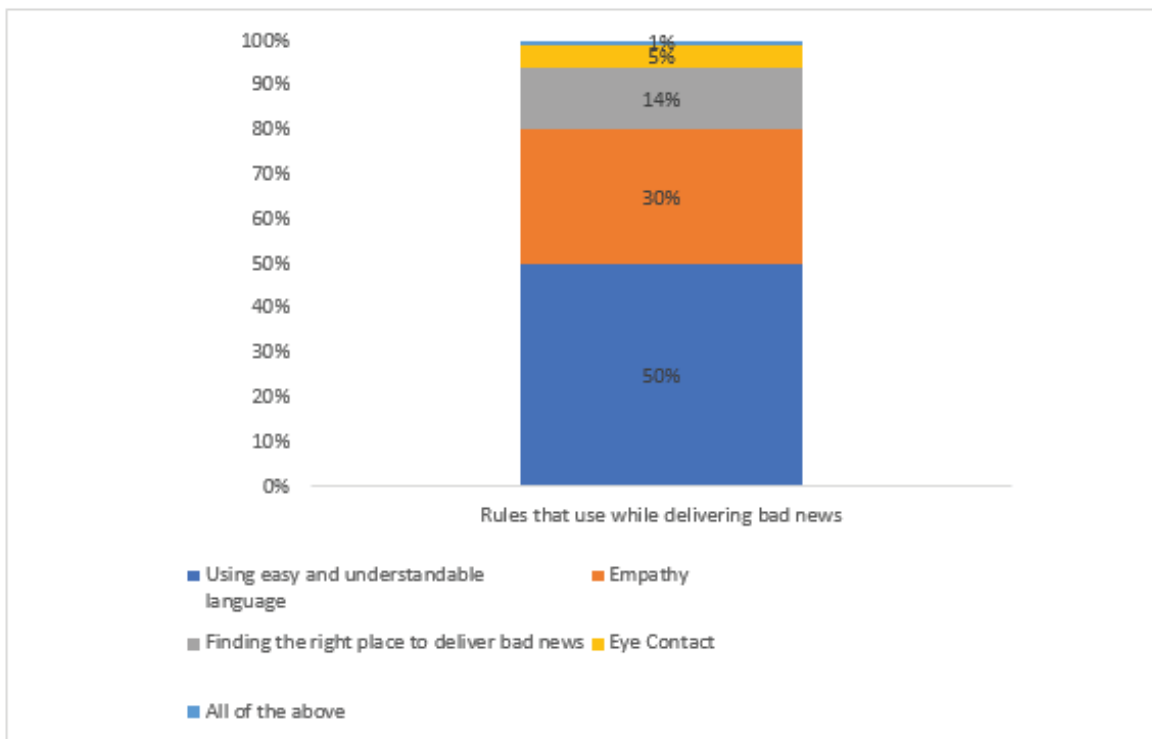
**Figure 3.**

As seen in figure 3, majority of the respondents were not aware of any specific procedure/protocol required to be followed during a BBN situation.



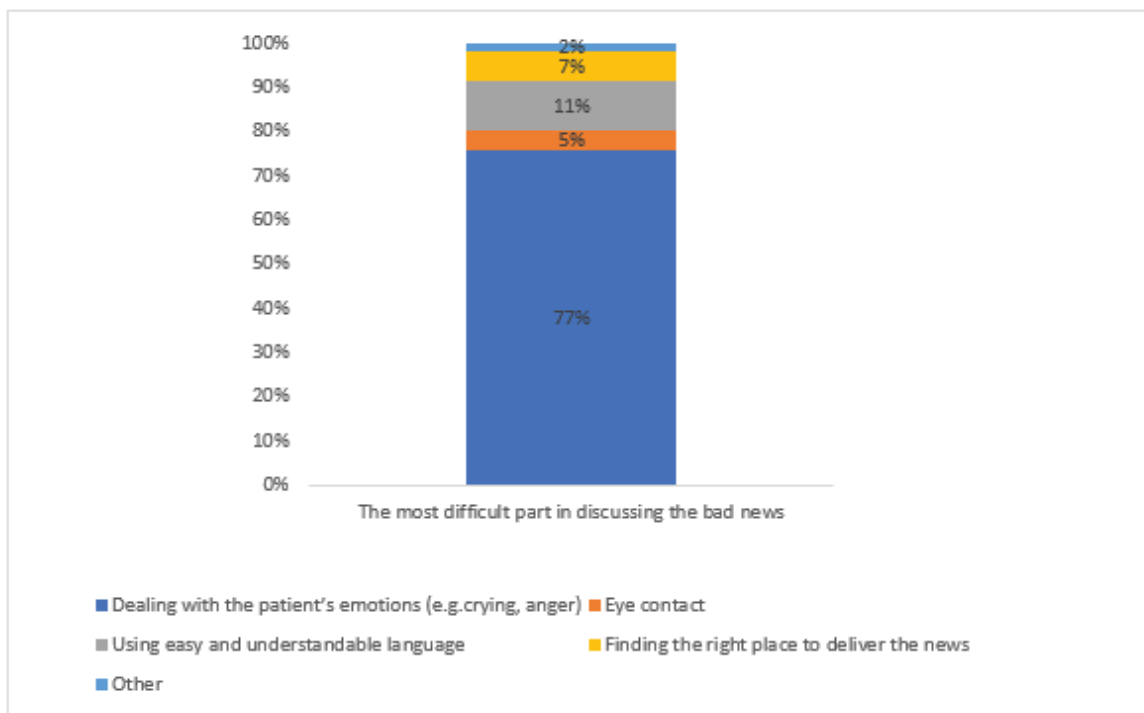
**Figure 4.**

As seen in figure 4, only one fifth of the respondents had undergone formal training in BBN as part of their academic curriculum. As many as, 62% of the respondents cited that that they have not received any kind of formal/informal training on the subject.



**Figure 5**

As seen in figure 5, majority respondents felt that using easy and understandable language is the most important rule while delivering bad news.



**Figure 6**

As shown in figure 6, a whopping 77% respondents felt that dealing with the patients' emotions was the most challenging and difficult aspect.

## Discussion

The present study was done to assess the baseline awareness of EMS professionals about BBN and to devise a customized training program for them. Most of the respondents were in the age group of 21-25 with nearly 93% of them having a work experience of 1-5 Years. This category of EMS professionals is the most vulnerable to poor communication and inept handling of difficult patient situations. Being first responders, it is essential to train them in various soft skills including empathy and effective communication apart from hard clinical skills.

Unfortunately, majority of the respondents were not even aware that BBN is a separate subject having specific procedures and protocols followed globally. This in spite of the fact that majority of them were encountering BBN situations regularly in course of their work. The higher frequency of such situations could be partly attributed to the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic.

Current teaching curricula do not adequately focus on soft skills teaching and such delicate topics are seldom covered in continued medical education courses and conferences. This trend needs to be changed urgently so that EMS professionals are better equipped in handling stressful situations like bad prognosis or death of the patient.

Even in the absence of formal training the respondents were aware of the basic individual rules to use while delivering bad news. Although, the lack of training reflected in the meagre 3% correct response to the item which is that effective communication requires eye contact, empathy, finding a right place to deliver bad news and using an understandable language to deliver bad news.

The lack of training instils fear of facing such situations and adversely affects the mental health of EMS professionals. This can be corrected by utilizing tools like simulation and role play to provide adequate exposure to EMS professionals in a safe environment.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study point towards an emergent need of formal practical training on this crucial yet ignored aspect of the health care professionals' duties.

Comparative Studies can be conducted in the future to assess the effectiveness of this training program.

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