Communicating Difficult News: Jesse Baron

Background: Jesse is 6 month-old infant who is sent by her primary care pediatrician for an abdominal ultrasound because of fussiness and leukocytosis (increased white blood cell count, indicating infection or inflammation in the body). She had been seen in the Emergency Department 3 days previously because of irritability and decreased oral intake for 2 or 3 days. A limited ultrasound of the abdomen at that time was performed to evaluate specifically for an intussusception (infolding or telescoping of one segment of bowel into another. In addition, even though the ultrasound exam was of the abdomen, if it was done to evaluate for intussusception only, it would not cover the other main organs of the body – liver, spleen, gallbladder, kidneys, etc). The US was negative for intussusception. (It did not show an intussusception). Jesse was admitted overnight, and then discharged the next day. Her pediatrician now sends her for a full abdominal ultrasound (looking at all of the organs of the abdomen) that shows a large liver tumor, likely a malignant hepatoblastoma (a malignant liver cancer of childhood). After the sonographer (ultrasound technologist) reviews the study with the radiologist, the radiologist discusses the probable diagnosis with the pediatrician, who is seeing patients offsite all day and not available to talk to Jesse’s parents. The pediatrician asks the radiologist to let the parents know that he/she cannot talk to them until later in the afternoon. The pediatrician asks the radiologist to discuss the findings with Jesse’s parents and to notify the oncologists so that Jesse may be seen immediately. The radiologist talks to the oncologists, who will come to see Jesse and her parents in the ultrasound suite.

Enactment: The radiologist enters the room to discuss the matter with Jesse’s parents, Andrew and Felicia Baron, whom the radiologist has not yet met. The radiologist discusses what has transpired (the imaging findings and the discussion with the pediatrician), and lets the parents know that the oncologists are on their way. The radiologist would like to further examine the child with the ultrasound.