

When children die

Angus was 16 years old, with everything to live for. One Saturday afternoon, a teammate kicked him during a football game at their school. He fell down. Luckily, the school doctor was in the audience with his son. 'He's taking a long time to get up,' the man said to his son. 'He's obviously not okay. I'd better have a good look at him.' So the doctor pulled Angus off the field and ordered a CAT scan of his head. Very good move. Very bad news. Angus came home after that.

As Angus' family doctor, I had to perform a duty I bloody well dreaded, one that's never got any easier. Poor Angus was too ill to come in to the surgery. I thought about the little boy in the humpy. No way would I give him the news over the phone. His parents were willing to come in for the diagnosis, but I felt that Angus should hear it first, alone. As I headed down the avenue of 100-year-old elms lining the drive to the farmhouse, I thought about how unfair life is, to do such a dreadful thing to such a nice boy. I usually enjoyed the drive and had a particular liking for the Eastons' Georgian homestead, perhaps because of my fondness for the family. As I rolled to a stop that day, I didn't feel the usual leap of gladness in my heart as Matey, Angus' Gross Munsterlander, bounded to my side. The Eastons had bought him as a guard dog, but he never barked at strangers. The raucous peacocks that scuttered across the gravelled circular drive performed that function better. Matey never minded being out-performed, and in fact got on quite well with the birds.

I couldn't postpone it any longer, so I got out of the car. Mrs Easton came running out to meet me. 'Oh doctor,' she said anxiously, 'We're so glad you've come.'

I tried to smile, unsuccessfully. Bloody hell. She knew. We didn't exchange words. Those were for Angus.

'We're all gathered round Angus, waiting for you,' she said weakly, her voice quavering. 'May I get you a cup of tea?'

'I don't want to trouble you, Mrs Easton,' I said humbly. I can't think why some doctors are arrogant. My patients always humble me with their courage.

'No trouble, doctor,' she said, rallying a bit in her role as hostess. 'We're all having something — although I do wish the girls wouldn't drink so much cola, it's so bad for their teeth,' she continued. I let her chatter. As she led me into the house she added, 'Angus asked me to make your favourite cheese scones. They're just ready to bring up.'

'I know,' I replied, swallowing hard. 'I can smell them.' I didn't want to tell her that they set my tummy rumbling, because it shamed me to think that I could respond to food at a time like this.

'You know where he is,' Mrs Easton said. 'Go on up to his room, and I'll join you shortly.'

The poor woman needed time to compose herself or perhaps delay the inevitable, so I didn't offer to carry anything upstairs. I trudged up the stairs, round the corner and down the hall. I could hear muted laughter. 'I'll soon fix that,' I thought grimly, opening the third door on the left.

Angus lay in bed with his two younger sisters on either side, holding his hands. Jane had just turned 13. Juliet was 14. Mr Easton paced at the foot of the bed, trying to hide the emotions conflicting his heart. The daughters were genuinely happy to be tending their brother, in that sublime way of children. I reflected for the thousandth time, how different boys' rooms smell from those of girls. Angus wouldn't be needing the soccer ball or cricket bat spilling out of the closet.

'Thank you for coming all this way to see us, doctor,' Mr Easton said warmly, coming to greet me with his hand extended. 'We appreciate it.'

'Not at all,' I said. 'Angus, how are you feeling?'

'I've been better, doctor,' he said quietly. He wasn't wrong. His blue eyes clouded with pain, but Angus didn't complain. It wasn't in his nature.

Mrs Easton entered bearing a tray of tea, cola, scones and sweet biscuits. Her husband went to help her. He placed the laden tray on the desk, on top of some important-looking school papers. No one noticed. After Mrs Easton served drinks and food, everyone got into position to hear my news. Making sure that people seat themselves appropriately and comfortably is a necessary ritual, I find.

'Angus, are you certain that you would not prefer to be alone to hear what I've got to say to you?' I asked, wishing I had better news.

Angus shook his head bravely. Poor lad.

'We're a close family, doctor,' Mrs Easton explained needlessly. I could see that in their body language, Mr Easton's hand on his wife's shoulder, she stroking her son's head, the sisters still holding their brother's hands.

I blew on my tea to cool it and bit into a cheesy scone, which didn't taste as good as I expected.

'Angus,' I began. 'I want to be completely honest. You have a tumour of the pineal gland, which is right in the centre of the brain.'

Dead silence ensued.

'What's the prognosis?' Mr Easton asked gruffly.

'Not at all good, I'm afraid,' I said reluctantly.

'You mean I won't be taking over the farm from Dad?' he asked, only half joking.

I put the scone on the blue willow-pattern plate. I had no right to eat it. 'You won't be here next year at this time,' I said gently. I couldn't bring myself to say that he wouldn't make Christmas.

I didn't turn in the direction of the stifled sob from his father.

'That knock on the head —' Mrs Easton began.

'— caused a haemorrhage,' I finished.

'He's always been healthy. We'd have noticed,' cried the distraught elder sister.

'You could very well be wrong,' Mr Easton said. I know he didn't intend the remark to sound so rude.

'Please feel free to request a second

opinion. I don't mind in the least. In fact, I sincerely hope I'm proven wrong,' I said, and meant it.

Angus had not said a word.

'I'm sorry, Angus,' I said.

'Thank you, Dr Grimely,' he said softly.

I'll never forget the look of incredible relief on that face.

'Don't hesitate to ring me at any hour, Angus,' I said, preparing to leave the family alone.

Pulling away from the house, I grieved that Angus would not see another cycle of those glorious elms. His relieved expression appeared before me. Terminally ill people prefer honesty. If they don't they're usually in denial, something that most certainly did not apply to Angus.

I saw quite a lot of the poor child for the rest of his short life. We got him all sorts of radiotherapy, which did absolutely no good and made him lose his beautiful silky blond hair.

One day I went out to the farm. Angus had lost his sight. His younger sister sat on the bed, one leg up and the other on the edge of a chair. She stroked his face while he talked on the telephone. The room was fairly large, conveniently, as it would soon accommodate the various paraphernalia required to keep Angus at home until the end. A signed photograph of a rugby star had pride of place on the dresser. Into a corner of the frame, his father had thrust a small photograph of a healthy Angus playing rugby.

'No sir, pine is fine,' Angus said into the telephone. 'I don't want a lot of money spent on it.' His sister whispered something in his ear. 'Please ring me back tomorrow,' he said. 'The doctor's just arrived.'

'How are you feeling today, Angus?' I asked as he replaced the receiver.

'Well, doctor,' he replied with a tired smile, 'It's obvious I'm going to die. I've been arranging my funeral.'

The girl whimpered.

Angus groped for his sister's hand. She grasped it immediately and held it to her face, biting back tears.

I couldn't do much but prescribe medication for the pain. 'Angus, I'll call in and see you in a few days. Ring me before that if you need anything, anything at all,' I said.

Angus nodded silently and closed his eyes.

As I left, I looked back at brother and sister, so filled with love for each other, and swallowed hard. Bloody cancer.

Angus deteriorated rapidly. Every time I went out, one of his sisters was sitting with him. They never left him alone. Mrs Easton was just great. Mr Easton was out all day with his sheep, but he and his wife took it in turns to stay up with Angus at night. Seeing the system work well is inspiring, when everything falls into place and everyone works together, even though the outcome is bloody awful. Angus' mother fed him through tubes, which my partner and I had to take out and put back again two or three times a day. One of the local oncologists supplied everything we needed. The district nurses were wonderful. Angus stayed at home rather than going into hospital, because that's

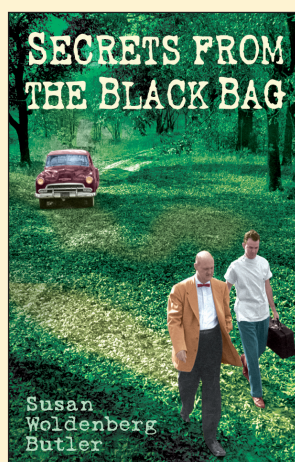
what the family wanted. The Easton family lived quite a way out of town. They'd have found it extremely difficult to tend both house and farm and care for Angus as they wanted.

Over a period of 6 months, Angus became deaf and wasted away. The family were not terror-stricken, as sometimes happens, nor did they try to exclude Angus because they themselves could not handle it. I was privileged to see that family at its most magnificent.

It was one of my saddest and yet one of my most uplifting cases. I was just so bloody impressed with the whole family. Every time I hear my colleagues debate the merits of telling the truth to terminally ill patients, I think of Angus Easton's look of incredible relief when I gave him the worst news a doctor could possibly give a patient. Every time I eat cheese scones, I think of brave Angus and his wonderful family. I've never forgotten him.

Susan Woldenberg Butler

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This story is taken from the RCGP Publication *Secrets from the Black Bag*, by Susan Woldenberg Butler. This fictionalised account of the lives

of remote and single-handed GPs brilliantly captures the essence of family medicine, and so much more. The secrets from the black bag presented in these stories have been selected and fictionalised from a number of interviews with home-visiting GPs. Presented as a series of interconnecting chapters in 11 voices, meet the doctors as they speak to us of their delights, their fears, their failings and successes. The writing is clear and engaging, at times funny, at times poignant.

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