OSCE checklist for breaking bad news

An OSCE checklist for breaking bad news starts before you speak: prepare, find out what the patient knows, warn them, tell them plainly, respond to emotion and agree the next step. This is our own practice list.

The checklist, step by step

1. Prepare. Know the facts, find a private space, turn off your phone and sit down.
2. Introduce yourself, confirm identity and ask who the patient would like to have present.
3. Ask what the patient already knows or suspects.
4. Ask how much the patient wants to be told.
5. Give a short warning that the news is serious.
6. Say the news in plain words, in small pieces, without jargon or euphemism.
7. Pause. Stay quiet and let the patient respond.
8. Acknowledge the emotion, and name it.
9. Check what the patient has understood, and answer questions honestly. If you do not know, say so.
10. Summarise, and explain the next steps and who will be there.
11. Give contact details and a plan to meet again, then thank the patient.

What candidates commonly forget

- Sitting down and avoiding interruptions.
- Asking what the patient already knows.
- Using the real word, such as cancer, if that is the diagnosis.
- Leaving a pause.
- Not rushing into treatment.

How to use this list

This is our own practice checklist. Exam bodies mark in their own way. Use it to build a routine, then say each step aloud as you do it. You can also practise with an AI patient on this site, and try one station free with no sign-up. See also the PLAB 2 breaking bad news guide.

Common questions

What does the first sentence need to do?

Warn the patient that the news is serious, so that they have a moment to prepare.

Should I reassure the patient straight away?

Acknowledge the feelings first. False reassurance can damage trust.

Is this the examiner's marking sheet?

No. It is our own list for practice.

Sources

- NICE: Shared decision making (NG197)
- NICE: Patient experience in adult NHS services (CG138)

Checked 2026-11-13. Fees and rules change, so confirm them with the regulator before you book.