

Doctors, Patients, Families and Death and Dying

SUMMARY: “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” Leo Tolstoy, the legendary nineteenth century Russian novelist. In czarist Russia, a complacent and superficial judge falls ill (with what later analysts believe to be a stomach or kidney cancer). With the exception of his sensitive young son and his faithful servant Gerasim, his family treats him with impatience, while his doctors cannot be bothered to answer his questions or explain his condition to him. Worse, both wife and physician collude to imprison Ivan in a web of silence about the seriousness of his illness, so that he suffers terribly not only from physical distress but from the pain of isolation and lies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the doctor’s attitude toward his patient? Toward himself?
2. What role does the doctor play in the family?
3. How does Ivan feel about his doctor?
4. Describe the nature of the coalition between wife and doctor against the patient?
5. What is the function of the “celebrated” specialist? How does he maintain the homeostasis of the system?

TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Initial PPP – both wife and patient revere physician, expect him to explain the inexplicable and resolve the disorder in their lives
2. Illicit coalition – of doctor and wife leads to scapegoating of patient

SUMMARY: “Mercy” Richard Selzer, former Yale University surgeon and professor, a widely recognized essayist and short story writer, who has received many awards for his fiction, including a National Magazine Award, the Pushcart Prize, and a Guggenheim fellowship. In this short story, a patient is dying an excruciatingly painful death in the last stages of pancreatic cancer. The patient, his wife, and especially the patient’s mother plead and even command the physician to end his suffering. The family is united in what needs to be done – ie., the patient’s life must be terminated – but they must go outside the family system to enlist the aid of a professional. The physician agrees, and provides a massive dose of morphine. The patient, however, does not die. Waiting by his bedside, the doctor actually considers smothering him, but decides he has done as much as he can do to hasten death. When he leaves the patient to inform the family, the mother blames him for not following through.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the relationship like between doctor and patient? Does it change at all from beginning to end of the story?
2. What is the relationship between mother and son? What role does the physician assume in the family system?

3. Do you agree with the mother that the doctor has failed his patient (and the family)?
Why or why not?

TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Initial therapeutic alliance in which doctor, patient, and family members all agree on what has to be done (physician-assisted suicide for suffering patient)
2. Deteriorates into illicit coalition of patient (implicitly) and family members against the physician whom they perceive as having betrayed them