Cancer as Metaphor

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ABSTRACT

Shortly before his death in 1995, Kenneth B. Schwartz, a cancer patient at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), founded The Kenneth B. Schwartz Center at MGH. The Schwartz Center is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and advancing compassionate health care delivery, which provides hope to the patient and support to caregivers and encourages the healing process. The center sponsors the Schwartz Center Rounds, a monthly multidisciplinary forum where caregivers reflect on important psychosocial issues faced by patients, their families, and their caregivers, and gain insight and support from fellow staff members.

Metaphors illuminate complex issues and can paint a thousand words. However, fundamental to individual and collective expression, they are also capable of creating or perpetuating stereotypes, and stigma. In oncology, the military metaphor is perhaps the most prominent, with the high profile of the “War on Cancer,” and the imperative for patients to have a fighting spirit. Balancing the instinct to fight with words of healing and acceptance remains a challenge. The history of the military metaphor and how the humanities have illuminated cancer as a metaphor are reviewed. The advantages and disadvantages of the use of this metaphor are discussed, as well as the use of other metaphors in the psychosocial dynamic of care.

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What's this?
“We will beat cancer sooner.” Whether you’re a patient, a carer, a fundraiser or a doctor – talking about cancer almost inevitably means using metaphors. But is one metaphor better than another? And how do different metaphors affect different people? That’s the question Professor Elena Semino, a linguist from Lancaster University, has spent the last few years trying to figure out. Cancer has become a metaphor for death, and we are relearning the ancient truth that the ultimate cause of death is life. Maybe we are putting the emphasis in the wrong place. We should think more about what to do with life rather than futilely trying to postpone an inevitable death. Alan Meisel, a lawyer, and Charles W. Lidz, a sociologist, are assistant professors of psychiatry at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.