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CANCER METAPHOR AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH CANCER-RELATED ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS

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Abstract: While there have been many studies on the different metaphors used by cancer patients to describe their illness, there have been surprisingly few systematic attempts to examine the connection between these metaphors and the patients' cancer-related attitudes and behaviours. Using the Metaphorical Identification Procedure (MIP) and the Risk Perception Attitude (RPA) framework, this study examined the data gathered from 31 cancer patients from Kuching Sarawak through semi-structured interview in light of the above mentioned connection. The results show that the patients turned to the structural, the conspiratorial, the journey and several other metaphors to describe their terminal conditions. The results also show that the metaphors used by these patients shed further insights into their cancer-related attitudes (e.g., low to high risk perceptions) and behaviours (e.g., weak to strong efficacy beliefs), and the different attitudinal groups to which they belong (e.g., responsive, proactive, avoidance, indifferent). Such insights, as the study concluded, may help address some of the current concerns regarding metaphors in oncology, especially those related to the different effects that these metaphors have on different cancer sufferers.

Keywords: cancer, metaphor, risk perception, efficacy belief, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Cancer is a complicated disease that is usually difficult to talk about, especially among cancer patients. Some patients may avoid discussing their illness, while others may wish to describe it through various communicative means, one of them being the use of metaphor. Metaphor, in its basic sense, is “a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else [as it] brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this” (Burke, 1969, p. 503). In other words, metaphor is “seeing one thing *as* something else, pretending “this” is “that” because there is no knowledge of how to think or talk about “this”, so instead “that” is a way of saying something” (McFague, 1982, p. 15).

This definition of metaphor rings true for many cancer patients who, despite their varying levels of knowledge about the disease, may use various kinds of metaphor to make sense of the illness, its causation and prognosis. The military metaphor, for example, is one of the most prominent types of metaphor in oncology, given “the imperative for (cancer) patients to have a fighting spirit” that is responsible for victory over the disease (Penson, Schapira, Daniels, Chabner, & Lynch, 2004, p. 708). Studies have shown that many cancer patients view their illness metaphorically using militaristic imagery such as fights, battles or wars. Such metaphors are not only used by these patients to decipher the strange and perplexing disease, but also to discuss it and help them deal with their prognosis. As Blum (2015) puts it,