

WHAT CANCER METAPHORS SAY ABOUT PATIENTS' CANCER RELATED ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: *This article presents findings from a study that explored the use of cancer metaphors among 31 cancer patients from Malaysia. The metaphors were explored through a qualitative process to provide insights into the common types of metaphors used and how these metaphors provided further information about patients' cancer-related attitudes and health behaviours. The results show that the patients employed the structural, the conspiratorial, the journey and several other metaphors to talk about the disease and illness experience. The results also show that the metaphors revealed further insights into the patients' 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). These insights may help address some of the current issues surrounding metaphors in oncology, particularly those related to the impact that cancer metaphors can have on different individual patients.*

Keywords: cancer, metaphor, perceived risk, self-efficacy, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Cancer is a sail and you are the one who monitors the sail - Participant 2

Cancer is a veil of silence because of the stigma and misformation - Participant 24

Cancer is a complex disease that is not easy to talk about, particularly among cancer patients. Some patients may not want to discuss their illness, while others may be willing to talk about it through various communicative means including the use of figures of speech such as the metaphor. As can be seen from the above-mentioned quotations taken from a recent study (Jerome & Liaw, 2019), cancer is described metaphorically by individual patients based on their knowledge and experiences. Metaphor, in its general 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). Put differently, 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 bodes true for many cancer patients who, despite their different levels of knowledge about the disease, may employ different types of metaphor to decipher the illness, its causation and prognosis. The military metaphor, for instance, is one of the most salient types of metaphor in oncology, given “the imperative for (cancer) patients to have a fighting spirit” that is conduit for ensuring their triumph over the disease (Penson, Schapira, Daniels, Chabner, & Lynch, 2004, p. 708). Research has shown that many cancer patients