

■ CNE Article

# The Use of Metaphor in Discourse About Cancer: A Review of the Literature

Kristine J. Harrington, MS, RN, BSN, CNL



© iStockphoto.com/RelaxFoto.de

Imagery and metaphors are used throughout health communication and can be particularly powerful in discourse about cancer. Providers, patients, and the media may use descriptive language to convey the impact and experience of the disease. This article reviews the literature on metaphor in discourse about cancer and its effects. Also, the positive and negative effects of popular cancer-related imagery, such as military and journey metaphors, are explored. Metaphor can be used in nursing, through thoughtful use of imagery, to improve patient-centered care. By noting the imagery used by patients to describe their experiences with cancer, nurses can find a common language for connecting with patients and can advocate for greater awareness and more sensitive communication by other healthcare providers.

Kristine J. Harrington, MS, RN, BSN, CNL, is a community health nurse at Multnomah County Aging and Disability Services in Portland, OR. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the article. The author did not receive honoraria for this work. The content of this article has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the author, planners, independent peer reviewers, or editorial staff. Harrington can be reached at [kristinej.harrington@gmail.com](mailto:kristinej.harrington@gmail.com), with copy to editor at [CJONEditor@ons.org](mailto:CJONEditor@ons.org). (First submission December 2011. Revision submitted February 2012. Accepted for publication February 20, 2012.)

Digital Object Identifier:10.1188/12.CJON.408-412

**H**ealth communication often relies on imagery and metaphors to illuminate and explain. Metaphors are infused throughout the language of the U.S. healthcare system, particularly related to cancer. Healthcare providers and researchers may employ metaphor to make unfamiliar concepts more accessible to the public, whereas patients and family members use metaphor to share their illness experiences (Gibbs & Franks, 2002). This article will review the literature on metaphor in discourse about cancer and the current use of metaphor in cancer-related health communication. Popular metaphors will be explored, particularly images of cancer treatment as a war or journey. Also, in an effort to encourage the use of imagery and figurative language for improving patient-centered care, the significance of metaphor to nursing care will be discussed.

## Health Communications Tool

The use of figurative language in discourse about cancer serves multiple purposes. Metaphors make unfamiliar or abstract concepts more accessible by comparing them to ideas already possessed in a cognitive framework (Czechmeister, 1994; Kirklin, 2007; Skott, 2002). The language allows for the reconciliation of “the experiential and the existential” (Czech-

meister, 1994, p. 1226) by providing a relationship that creates meaning. Healthcare providers can harness that explanatory power of metaphor when presenting medical concepts that are unfamiliar to their patients (Casarett et al., 2010; Kirklin, 2007; Penson, Schapira, Daniels, Chabner, & Lynch, 2004; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004). Physicians who use analogies and metaphors in their illness explanations are considered to possess stronger communication skills by patients (Casarett et al., 2010). Creating a common language can enhance the therapeutic relationship by serving “as the basis for the shared understanding of clinical reality” (Reisfield & Wilson, 2004, p. 4024).

Patients with cancer also bridge communicative gaps by revealing aspects of their illness experiences through metaphor (Bowker, 1996; Domino, Affonso, & Hannah, 1992; Gibbs & Franks, 2002). Creating and sharing metaphors allow patients to make sense of their suddenly chaotic world (Byrne, 2008; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004), communicate emotions or experiences that are otherwise inexpressible (Skott, 2002), or exercise control through the imagery they choose (Bennett, Laidlaw, Dwivedi, Naito, & Gruzelier, 2006; Bowker, 1996). Patients may use multiple, even contradictory, metaphors to contextualize personal narratives, which reflect an internal struggle to reconcile and find meaning in their disrupted lives (Gibbs & Franks, 2002).