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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Accepting the humans-as-cancer concept comes easier if one also accepts the Gaia hypothesis that the planet functions as a single living organism. To be sure, the Earth is mostly inanimate. Its rocky, watery surface supports only a relatively thin layer of plants, animals and other living organisms. Whether as metaphor or hypothesis, the proposition that humans have been acting like malignant cancer cells deserves to be taken seriously.