

A 'battle' or a 'journey'? A large-scale study of metaphors for cancer

Background

Violence metaphors for cancer (including 'battle', 'fight', 'war') are used conventionally in English, but have been criticised for their potentially harmful consequences for patients. In recent policy documents in the UK (e.g. the NHS 2007 Cancer Reform Strategy), they have been avoided in favour of the notion of cancer as a 'journey' with clinical 'pathways' delineated as models of care.

Methods

The ESRC-funded project 'Metaphor in End-of-Life Care' at Lancaster University combined manual qualitative analysis with quantitative computer-aided methods to investigate metaphor use in 1.5 million-words of interviews and online forum contributions by terminally ill cancer patients, family carers and health professionals. The frequencies and functions of Violence and Journey metaphors were systematically studied across all three groups.

Results

Both Violence and Journey metaphors are regularly used by all three groups. In particular, patients use a variety of these to talk about a wide range of aspects of their illness experiences (*Did you find your journey a battle or a [...] trudge?*). There is evidence that Violence metaphors can express and reinforce negative feelings, especially about the self. However, they can also have a positive, empowering function (e.g. expressing personal determination and mutual solidarity), while Journey metaphors are sometimes used to express feelings of distress and disempowerment (e.g. patients describing themselves as 'passengers' on the cancer 'journey').

Conclusions

The variety of attitudes, emotions and needs that are expressed by patients' Violence and Journey metaphors need to be addressed in the provision of healthcare. A blanket rejection of Violence metaphors would deprive some patients of the potential positive functions of these metaphors, just like an uncritical promotion of Journey metaphors overlooks the disempowering ways in which they can be used. Greater awareness of patients' own metaphor use can lead to more effective approaches to communication about the experience of cancer.