On (Cancer) Language

Since I have realized that will never leave this world without cancer, it is finally time that I accept the language spoken by my fellow cancer travelers.

July 11, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

As someone who has been co-habitating with cancer for over six years now, I remain remarkably underinformed about this disease. Part of this ignorance is a result of not wanting to know more and part of this is just who I am (by which some might think I mean I am an ignoramus but I prefer to think of it as being selectively informed). And still another part is that there is a whole language that has evolved in the world of cancer that one needs to know to fully understand what on earth people are talking about. This cancer tongue is complicated, chock full of mysterious abbreviations, euphemisms, doctor-speak, patient-speak (often about doctors and their doctor-speak) and unpronounceable medications.

But since I have realized that I will never leave this world without cancer, I think it is finally time that I accept the language spoken by my fellow cancer travelers. To that end, and to help others who have cancer or know someone who does, I have compiled the following partial list of cancer terminology. Please note that some of these terms are sensitive to certain people so utter them with caution and never in mixed company. Also, these terms are not organized in any logical manner — e.g., alphabetically — but rather as they occurred to me or sometimes after I remembered that they had occurred to me (see “Chemo brain” below).

- Cancer: It’s not a competition, but this word means pretty much the worst thing that can happen to a person. It is a complicated disease that is not especially well understood. It also seems to come in two main varieties — solid tumor and blood. They are both terrible (but, again, it’s not a competition). It also has been known to travel under assumed identities including “the Emperor of Maladies,” as it is a disease that thinks pretty highly of itself.

- Survivor: This is one of the more hotly debated cancer terms. Some people choose to use it because they are still around to do so. Others prefer not to self-describe this way, in part because the term suggests that one has outlasted cancer. For many of us, however, that is not really possible. We may be surviving, but that damn cancer is right there along with us.

- Endurer: Similar to survivor, but for many a more accurate description. We haven't triumphed over cancer, but we are getting along with it — for the time being. (I "borrowed" this term from my friend Rudy Fischmann and his Brain Cancer Diaries on YouTube — definitely check it out! — but I think it will catch on with cancer-ites everywhere.)

- Warrior: Another term that stokes controversy, it implies a certain battle imagery. Americans in particular love to make war on all kinds of things and cancer is no exception. And while anyone with cancer is certainly in a battle for her or his life, there is not a whole bunch that the cancer endurer/survivor/warrior can actually do. It's really a struggle between one's own misbehaving body (and cells in particular) and whatever drugs one is given to counteract that. The body might be more aptly described as the battleground but that seems too passive for our combative culture.

- Healthy Diet and More Exercise: These are great! They also don't kill cancer!

- CBD: Pot with the fun parts removed and of debatable efficacy. But if it helps, why not.

- Green tea: See CBD above but even less fun (unless accompanied by good sushi).

- Bus: A common scapegoat employed by doctors and other cancer professionals when they wish to avoid answering a question about the cancer sufferers remaining time on Earth. The term is typically employed as follows:
  - Patient: Do you think this cancer will kill me?
  - Doctor: I don't know. You could get hit by a bus tomorrow.

Why it is a bus that is so often used to make this non-point is unclear. Perhaps if most cancer patients lived in urban areas with regular bus service, it might make sense. But who really rides the bus? Why not just say a car accident? Is there some anti-public transportation agenda at work here? It's very odd. Regardless, it isn't fooling anyone.

- Chemotherapy: Often called simply chemo by its friends, this anti-cancer treatment involves taking poison and using that poison to kill off the cells that are already killing the cancer sufferer. It is akin to gambling — which will kill the patient first: uncontrolled cell division or loosely controlled toxin infusions? Sometimes chemo can actually give one cancer, which really seems to be unnecessarily redundant and a big waste of time.

- Radiation: Sometimes poison just isn't enough so we go right for the big guns and try to nuke that tumor out of existence.

- Hemonc: This is a friendly term for a hematologist. For those who do not remember much about etymology, hema is a Greek (or Latin?) word meaning blood. And "onc" is the first part of oncology — the study and treatment of cancer. So a hemonc is a blood cancer doctor. I didn't know that either.

- Chemo Brain: A real mixed blessing. It is an understudied, misunderstood phenomenon that results from undergoing chemo and that somehow messes up one's ability to remember things. This doesn't sound all that surprising given that chemo is poisoning one's cells rather indiscriminately. Essentially it causes one to forget that certain things took place. In my case, those certain things are often requests to do chores around the house.

- Power of Positive Thinking: I know absolutely nothing about this and never use this term.

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