

When you think of the word ‘cancer’, what are the first words that spring to mind?

Fighter. Hero. Cancer-stricken. The words and metaphors people use to talk about cancer often feel worlds apart from any other disease. But how far does it go? Do words matter?

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The language that is used and the words that are used when dealing with a patient is probably one of the most important things about being diagnosed, and that, I think, has to change.

Leanne Pero, ex-dance teacher, entrepreneur and author who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2016.

In a world where as many as one in two of us will receive a cancer diagnosis in our lifetimes,¹ and with survival for many cancers extending far beyond what was once thought possible, words matter. Language can affect how we live with the disease – and it can even have an impact on treatment.

Studies have found that the fear of cancer may affect willingness to get screened.² Metaphors which present cancer as a “journey to be navigated” can influence how patients choose to address their illness, while metaphors that present cancer as a “foe to be beaten” may reinforce ideas that more aggressive treatment options are necessary.³

“Cancer is not a war. It’s not a battle to be won. Cancer is a disease that plays by its own rules and does not always respond the way it is supposed to,” says Dr Shikha Jain, a US-based oncologist.

It is important to explore the way that cancer patients and healthcare providers emotionally respond to commonly used words and metaphors, and to what extent that might impact treatment choices across different cancers. The impact of these words on a patient diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer may be dramatically different for an individual living with metastatic prostate cancer, for example.

“No metaphor works in the same way for everyone. And this is particularly the case when it comes to illness. We should be enabled and encouraged to use the metaphors that work best for us,” explains Professor Elena Semino, an expert in linguistics and health communication.

By bringing together patients, advocates, and researchers to explore the language of cancer – and the impact words can have on those living with it – Novartis hopes to shed light on this often under-appreciated aspect of caring for people living with a cancer diagnosis.

“Cancer care is about more than longer lives; it’s about better lives too,” adds Marie-France Tschudin, President of Innovative Medicines International at Novartis. “It’s really important to listen carefully to those living with cancer, make sure we understand their perspectives, and integrate their insights into what we do, so that we can better support their needs.”

Let’s Talk About the C Word: Navigating a cancer diagnosis and the life beyond it with Leanne Pero

Leanne Pero discusses her experiences of life before, during and after breast cancer, and how it inspired her to advocate for herself and others like her.

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References:

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3. Stephenson MT., and Witte K. Fear, threat, and perceptions of efficacy from frightening skin cancer messages. *Public Health Reviews*. 1998;26;2:147-174

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