MANCHESTER
1824

IS IT ALL IN THE LABEL? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN USING A MEDICAL TERM VERSUS EUPHEMISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OUTCOMES AND HEALTH BEHAVIOURS AMONG INDIAN CANCER PATIENTS

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About

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INTRODUCTION

Physicians use euphemisms such as lump, tumour, swelling, growth to convey the diagnosis of cancer to the patient (Holland et al.,1987)

Usage of euphemisms have been associated with lower levels of anxiety as opposed to using a medical term among patients (Dunn et al., 1993)

In India, the term cancer has negative connotations (Kishore et al., 2007)

The stigma associated with the term cancer results in families opting for non-disclosure (Chittem et al., 2012)

Box 1

Euphemism and medical term categorization

The words listed were categorized into

(a) medical terms (e.g., cancer, tumour , malignancy) i.e., words that are commonly accepted as medical terms for cancer

Or

(b) euphemisms (e.g., gadda', 'kanthi') i.e., a word that is not a clear medical term for cancer (this included symptoms or medical procedures)

A total of 13 different euphemisms were found including 'gadda'" (*n* =81), symptoms or procedures (*n* =48), 'kanthi' (*n* = 11), 'noppi' (*n* = 81)

A total of 3 different words were categorized as medical terms (*n*=162) 'cancer' , 'tumour' (*n*=5), 'malignancy' (*n*=1))

Labelling

Euphemism users (EUs): Patients who used a euphemism as their first word to describe their illness

Medical term users (MTUs): Patients who used a medical term as their first word to describe their illness

Objectives

To investigate the relationship between patient use of medical terms versus euphemism and psychological outcomes and health behaviours in Indian cancer patients.

RESULTS

51% were EUs.

Compared to MTUs, EUs were more likely to be:

- ✓ From a low income background
- ✓ Have more number of children
- ✓ Having "other" as their education
- ✓ Having gynaecological cancers

- ✓ Lower responsibility on the CASS;
- ✓ Less self-distancing, emotional support, positive reframing, planning, acceptance, religion and blame coping mechanisms
- ✓ Greater illness identity, less understanding of illness, and lower perceptions of personal control
- ✓ Ate a healthy diet on fewer days
- ✓ Were less likely to spontaneously self-affirm.

DISCUSSION

Euphemism use is common in Indian cancer patients with just over half spontaneously using a euphemism for cancer.

EU are less likely to spontaneously self affirm, a strategy that is associated with coping with threat. This suggests that EU is a way of minimizing threat that cancer presents.

EU have weaker illness perceptions that is related to the use of fewer coping strategies that could lead to poorer health outcomes.

It is unclear from this study if euphemism use is harmful to patients. Further research is needed.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Three hundred and fifty patients were recruited from cancer hospitals in Hyderabad, India.

They were asked "what words do you use to describe your illness?" to understand the euphemisms they used to label their cancer (See Box 1)

- Scales included the English, Hindi and Telugu versions of the :
1. Brief illness perception questionnaire (BIPQ)
 2. Cancer stigma scale (CASS)
 3. Hospital anxiety/ depression scale (HADS)
 4. Brief COPE
 5. Spontaneous self-affirmation scale (SSAS)
 6. health behaviour scale

Mann-Whitney Us were used to explore differences between euphemism users (i.e., used euphemism as their 1st word; EU) and medical term users (MTU) groups.

IMPLICATIONS

Major research implication

In order to account for changes in language, it will be useful to examine the impact of euphemism use versus medical term use on psychological and behavioral outcomes overtime among cancer patients

Major clinical implication

Patients who used a euphemisms may benefit from psychoeducation in order to address their negative illness beliefs and improve their ability to use a variety of coping mechanisms

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