WORDS MATTER: LANGUAGE CHOICES AND PATIENT CARE

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WORD(S) OF THE YEAR VOTE
(AMERICAN DIALECT SOCIETY)
THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

- how we negotiate the relationships that make up our social world
- how we heal—and hurt
- how we share our stories
- how we teach and how we learn
- how we tell the world who we are
- a crucial part of how we experience and understand the world
CENTRAL QUESTIONS

How do we, in conversations with patients and their families, as well as co-workers, open and close possibilities for understanding others, for hearing their stories and letting their experiences shape our actions?

How does the wording of questions potentially shape the answers?

Why do metaphors matter? (And how often do we use metaphors anyway?)
PART 1: OPENING SPACE FOR STORIES
FROM THE FIELD OF NARRATIVE MEDICINE

Narrative competence: “the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others” (Charon 2001).

KEY MOMENTS IN INTERACTIONS WITH PATIENTS

• completing the patient intake form
• introducing ourselves
• asking questions
• providing active listening signals
LISTENING SIGNALS

- nonverbal cues (including eye contact)
- back-channeling
- managing topic shifts and interruptions
- acknowledging and rephrasing
SOME EFFECTS OF ELECTRONICALLY MEDIATED CONVERSATION (EMC)

- loss of physical context
- repurposing of punctuation and other written features
“Good news. The test results show it’s a metaphor.”
CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

• UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING
• TIME IS MONEY
• GOOD IS UP
• LIFE IS A JOURNEY
CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

- UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING
- TIME IS MONEY
- GOOD IS UP
- LIFE IS A JOURNEY
- TREATING A DISEASE IS FIGHTING A BATTLE/WAR
THE NOCEBO EFFECT OR NEGATIVE AFFECTIVE PRIMING

• “This is going to sting.”
• “You’ll feel a little bit of pain.”

versus

• “What are you experiencing?”
• “Focus on a cool sensation/the spreading of the numbness.”

THE POWER OF HOW WE PHRASE QUESTIONS

• The “pain group” was asked questions with words like surgical trauma, pain, wound, and worst pain imaginable.

• The “comfort group” was asked questions with words like healing wound, recovery, level of comfort, most comfort, and least comfort.

THE POWER OF HOW WE FRAME QUESTIONS

• The “pain group” was asked questions with words like surgical trauma, pain, wound, and worst pain imaginable.
  ✓ 65% of the women reported being bothered by pain.

• The “comfort group” was asked questions with words like healing wound, recovery, level of comfort, most comfort, and least comfort.
  ✓ 15% of the women reported being bothered by pain.

SELECTED REFERENCES
