The war against dementia: are we battle weary yet?

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Abstract

Recently, the use of military metaphors when discussing dementia and in particular Alzheimer’s disease has increased, both in medical literature and mainstream media. While military metaphors are a recent adoption when used to describe dementia, in oncology there has been longstanding debate about the usefulness of such metaphors. This article reviews the history of military metaphors in medicine, literature discussing their use, and considers their use in describing dementia. While military metaphors are widely used in medicine, consideration should be taken in their use as they have the potential to influence the way we and our patients conceptualise and experience illness and treatment.

Keywords: dementia, Alzheimer’s disease, metaphor, military, older people

Introduction

Recently, the use of military metaphors when discussing dementia and in particular Alzheimer’s disease has increased, both in medical literature and mainstream media. Titles including ‘Harnessing the immune system to battle Alzheimer’s disease’ [1], ‘Developing the framework for the international battle against Alzheimer’s disease’ [2] and ‘Dementia in Lewy body syndromes: A battle between hearts and minds’ [3] are found in medical journals.

Internationally, headlines reported President Obama declaring ‘War on Alzheimer’s disease’ early in 2012, after the working group for the National Alzheimer’s Plan Act announced the goal of finding a cure for Alzheimer’s disease by 2025 [4], while the United Kingdom’s Alzheimer’s Society website carries the banner: ‘Alzheimer’s Society: leading the fight against Alzheimer’s disease’ [5]. Meanwhile, the ‘Fight Dementia’ campaign was launched in 2011 by Alzheimer’s Australia, aiming to make dementia a national health priority [6].

While military metaphors are a recent adoption when used to describe dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, in oncology there has been debate about the usefulness of these metaphors dating back to Susan Sontag’s 1978 book ‘Illness as Metaphor’ [7], debate which is relevant to other areas of medicine including dementia care. This article reviews the history of military metaphors in medicine, literature discussing their use, and considers their use in describing dementia.

Is discussion of metaphor of any importance to the medical field? Lakoff and Johnson assert that metaphors represent more than just the way a subject is described, also reflecting conceptualisation and experience of the world, and therefore having the potential to affect thoughts and actions [8].

Military metaphors are widely used when describing health status and illness, and the mainstream media are frequently accused of perpetuating them. Military metaphors are certainly prevalent in newspaper headlines, in reference to a broad range of medical conditions including heart disease, obesity, multiple sclerosis, depression and allergies. Pharmaceutical companies use military metaphors and imagery in advertisements. An advertisement for the chemotherapy agent docetaxel features ‘Liberty Leading the People’, the 1830 Eugene Delacroix painting with a woman, ‘Liberty’, leading an army over the bodies of those fallen in battle [9].

However, these metaphors are not exclusively the domain of the popular and commercial press. In the medical literature, military metaphors are used in reference to an extensive range of medical conditions, including: cardiovascular disease—‘The reperfusion wars’ [10]; medical errors—‘The war against error’ [11] and psychological...
disorders—‘Are we winning the war against posttraumatic stress disorder?’ [12].

**Historical background**

The use of military metaphors to describe illness dates back to at least the seventeenth century when John Donne described his illness as ‘a canon shot’ and ‘a siege’ [13], and the physician Thomas Sydenham noted that ‘[a] murderous array of disease has to be fought against, and the battle is not a battle for the sluggard’ [14].

During the late nineteenth century infectious diseases were increasingly referred to in military terminology. Otis noted, ‘[w]hen … the disease [tuberculosis] is limited to an apex, in a man of fairly good personal and family history, the chances are that he may fight a good winning battle’ [15]. Worcester describing the physician’s duties wrote that ‘he must lead the fight against all contagion and infection’ [16].

By the early twentieth century military metaphors were being used in reference to cancer. Downing discussed ‘fighting cancer, leprosy, and tuberculosis’ [17], whereas Cabot wrote of ‘a good fighting chance’ of reducing cancer mortality [18]. In 1936 the Women’s Field Army was established by the American Cancer Society to engage in ‘trench warfare with a vengeance against a ruthless killer’ [19], by raising money and educating the public about breast cancer.

Following World War II, military metaphors were promoted in cancer care. Lerner suggests that this was due to the increased profile of surgeons returning from war, many of whom became involved in treating cancer [20]. Military metaphors were used by Mary Lasker of the American Society for the Control of Cancer in political lobbying for the advancement of cancer research [21]. The military metaphor was further promoted by President Nixon’s ‘War on Cancer’, with signing of the 1971 National Cancer Act. The use of military metaphors in the medical literature has continued in recent decades, along with discussion of their usefulness [22, 23, 24, 25].

**Positive aspects of military metaphors**

Military metaphors can be effective in raising the profile of health issues, bringing them to public and media attention. For example, prior to the establishment of the Women’s Field Army, breast cancer was rarely discussed, with medical attention often sought late through fear and embarrassment.

Military metaphors can also be used for marketing. For researchers, such language can improve research profiles and garner publicity. Charitable fundraising efforts are likely to be enhanced by talk of battles and fighting, with winning the battle held out as an incentive for contribution. For the mainstream media, military metaphors are likely to grab the reader’s attention and increase sales.

At the individual level, metaphors can aid understanding and communication. Military metaphors appear to resonate with both patients and doctors. For some, they come naturally and are helpful, imparting a sense of control at a time of uncertainty and powerlessness, and can assist in focusing attention on completing investigative procedures, surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment. Menaker reports personally finding military metaphors useful when following a complex treatment regime and when facing surgery. He noted ‘it may be a kind of self-delusion, but it may assist in self-preservation’ [26].

**Negative aspects of military metaphors**

A metaphor in itself is not harmful. However, military metaphors can become pervasive, with a ‘fighting attitude’ expected. For some aggressive metaphors are unhelpful, even distressing [22]. The pressure to maintain a fighting attitude, rather than discuss the real emotions they are experiencing, may become a burden, leaving the person isolated from family and friends [27].

Military metaphors have been criticised for focusing attention on disease as ‘the enemy’, while the patient as an individual with their own physical, psychological and social needs is forgotten [22, 23]. Such metaphors have also been criticised for perpetuating hierarchy in the doctor–patient relationship, with Fuks writing: ‘the battle cannot be won without following doctor’s orders’ [23]. In a military context, the defiance of orders is deemed ‘insubordinate’. This may limit a patient’s ability to exercise judgement or question treatment options.

Military metaphors may inhibit conversations about alternative treatment options or prognosis. The focus on ‘battling’ encourages ‘taking action’, and discussion is centred on treatment. The desire to ‘do everything possible’ could encourage doctors and patients to adopt burdensome therapies which hold a very small chance of benefit [22]. Other conversations, such as planning for the future, may be impeded. This may result in people with a limited prognosis, having insufficient time to accomplish other important tasks of life.

When military metaphors predominate, the outcome of an illness becomes one of victory or defeat. If someone does not ‘win their battle’ with illness, have they failed? The implication is that perhaps a person who is dying did not fight hard enough. This could leave those with progressive disease, feeling a sense of inadequacy or self-blame. Some people will favour a ‘fighting’ approach, but perhaps physicians can be complicit in the ongoing use of military metaphors, when promoting alternative metaphors or encouraging other ways of viewing the situation might be useful.

**The use of military metaphors in dementia**

The profile of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease and funding for research in these areas has been raised in recent years. Campaigns using military metaphors may well have contributed to this success in this traditionally poorly understood and under-resourced area.

However, at an individual level a chronic illness such as dementia is arguably not usefully conceived as a battle. First, no curative treatments are available as ‘arsenal’.
Secondly, many people with dementia are older and face other medical conditions or disability. These people may not be in a position to ‘fight’.

Dementia requires individualised multidisciplinary care focused on supporting the individual and their family or community network. However, military metaphors encourage disease focused, doctor led care. Future planning is a core component of dementia care, as this progressive illness is likely to limit capacity to make decisions at some point. Military metaphors focus on the immediate ‘fight’ and may impede conversations about the future. Additionally, fighting metaphors may leave some individuals feeling they have ‘lost’ as the disease progresses, an unnecessary burden for someone facing illness and disability. Finally, from a broader perspective, focus on ‘battling’ dementia, may distract from discussion about how our communities best care for and support an increasing number of people with dementia and their families as the population ages.

The adoption of military metaphors in healthcare may aid in raising awareness of illnesses and in fundraising. However, the metaphors we use in medicine potentially influence the way we and our patients conceptualise illness and treatment [8]. Therefore, consideration must be taken in their use to ensure individual harms are not forgotten.

Key points

- Military metaphors are widely used in many areas medicine and have a long history of use in reference to medical conditions.
- Military metaphors can aid in raising the profile and improve fundraising for a medical condition.
- Some individuals find military metaphors help them manage a medical condition.
- Military metaphors may encourage a disease focused approach and suggest to patients that a fighting attitude is expected.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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Supplementary data

Supplementary data mentioned in the text is available to subscribers in Age and Ageing online.

References

The very long list of references supporting this commentary has meant that only the most important are listed here and are represented by bold type throughout the text. The full list of references is available on the Supplementary data in Age and Ageing online.


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