2017

Without the White Coat: An Analysis of Pathographies by Physicians with Cancer

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Background
Pathography is a genre of literature defined as "a form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experiences of illness, treatment, and sometimes death." Jeffrey Aronson's analysis of 270 autopathographies found 54% were written by men, most authors were professional writers, a majority were published between 1980-2000, and most covered cancer, neurological/psychiatric diseases, HIV infections, and heart problems. Anne Hawkins's influential Reconstructing Illness analyzed the purposes and myths of this genre. Hawkins found four primary purposes of the authors: testimonial/didactic, angry, alternative medicine, and ecopathography. The mythic themes present were the myths of rebirth, battle, journey, healthy-mindedness, gain, and narrativity.

Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma

The Doctor/The Patient
By Allen Widome, 1989

Widome (1915-1992) served as the founder and Chief of the Anesthesiology Department at Columbia Hospital for Women in Washington D.C. until 1983. He joined the Army in 1941 during World War II.

In 1983 at age 70, he was diagnosed with throat cancer near his vocal cords after nearly a year of hoarseness. He was treated with the CHOP chemotherapy regimen and entered histiocytic lymphoma of the bowel, diaphragm, spleen, and kidney. In 1985 at age 70, he was diagnosed with throat cancer again. He was treated with a tracheo-esophageal prosthesis. Complications, side effects, and medical errors predominated his story.

Key Themes: Didactic/Testimonial Purpose, Myths of Diagnosis and Each Day of Treatment. His book was and chronicled in journal-like fashion the process of his diagnosis and each day of treatment. His book was made into a film, titled The Doctor starring William Hurt.

Key Themes: Didactic/Testimonial Purpose, Myths of Battle and Rebirth (as empathetic doctor and speaker)

Metaphors and Similes

• Illness as a Battle
  • Illness, Hospital, and Treatment as Prison, Death Sentence, Slavery, or Torture
  • Patient as Object or Number
  • Medicine as Business or Machine
  • Illness, Hospital, and Treatment as Prison, Death Sentence, Slavery, or Torture
  • Illness as a Battle

Conclusion

The physician-with-cancer pathography provides a unique perspective of our medical system. Doctors experience numerous difficulties similar to other patients, but their position and knowledge add to their frustrations. Their critiques may be taken more seriously by the profession than those of non-doctors. Further exploration of doctor pathography may lead to a better understanding of the doctor-patient relationship and how to improve patient care.

References