

Attitudes of Gratitude: An Analysis of 30 Cancer Patient Narratives Published by Leading U.S. Cancer Care Centers

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Abstract : This study examines the ways in which cancer patient narratives are portrayed and framed on the websites of three leading U.S. cancer care centers -The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, and Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. Thirty patient stories, ten from each cancer center website blog, were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative textual analysis of unstructured data, documenting repeated use of specific metaphors and tropes while charting common themes and other elements of story structure and content. Patient narratives were coded using grounded theory as the basis for conducting emergent qualitative research. As part of a systematic, inductive approach to collecting and analyzing data, recurrent and unique themes were examined and compared in terms of positive and negative framing, patient agency, and institutional praise. All three of these cancer care centers are teaching hospitals with university affiliations, that emphasizes an evidence-based scientific approach to treatment that utilizes the latest research and cutting-edge techniques and technology. Thus, the use of anecdotal evidence presented in patient narratives could be perceived as being in conflict with this evidence-based model, as the patient stories are not an accurate representation of scientific outcomes related to developing cancer, cancer reoccurrence, or cancer outcomes. The representative patient narratives tend to exclude or downplay adverse responses to treatment, survival rates, integrative and/or complementary cancer treatments, cancer prevention and causes, and barriers to treatment, such as the limitation of insurance plans, costs of treatment, and/or other issues related to access, potentially contributing to false narratives and inaccurate notions of cancer prevention, cancer care treatment and the potential for a cure. Both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that cancer patient stories featured on the blogsites of the nation's top cancer care centers deemphasize patient agency and, instead, emphasize deference and gratitude toward the institutions where the featured patients received treatment. Along these lines, language choices reflect positive framing of the cancer experience. Accompanying portrait photos of healthy appearing subjects as well as positive-framed headlines, subheads, and pull quotes function similarly, reflecting hopeful, transformative experiences and outcomes over hardship and suffering. Although patient narratives include real, factual scientific details and descriptions of actual events, the stories lack references to more negative realities of cancer diagnosis and treatment. Instead, they emphasize the triumph of survival by which the cancer care center, in the savior/hero role, enables the patient's success, represented as a cathartic medical journey.

Keywords : cancer framing, cancer stories, medical gaze, patient narratives

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