

QUESTION

Is it time to stop the war on cancer?

Suzanne Carroll, RN, MS, AOCN®, is an oncology clinical nurse specialist who works as a freelance oncology nurse consultant in Buffalo, NY. The author takes full responsibility for this content and did not receive honoraria or disclose any relevant financial relationships. Carroll can be reached at suzanneaprilcarroll@gmail.com, with copy to CJONEditor@ons.org.

Recently, a friend, colleague, and mentor died from cancer. Before her passing, we had a lovely visit for which I will be eternally grateful. Cancer had metastasized to her liver and brain, leaving her with pain and aphasia. Managing her pain contributed to the further slurring of her already garbled words. Despite her verbal languor, her mental clarity was discernible.

Although my friend could not verbalize hello or physically embrace me with a hug, she spoke volumes through the tears that trickled down her face when our eyes met.

On my bike ride home, I thought about my dear friend, our visit, and how much I learned from her throughout my oncology nursing career. I also started thinking about “the war on cancer,” because I have always despised the phrase. My friend had the nickname Commander when she served as our oncology nurse leader because of her military background and her ability to commandeer any situation. I worked under her leadership when the esteemed Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in Buffalo, New York, moved to a new building in 1999. She was fastidious in endorsing patient and nurse input to ensure a patient-centric design that was conducive to nursing care. Although she was our commander, she led by inclusion and example. I believe one of the reasons she was such an influential nurse leader was because she always sought the input of her frontline nurses and relentlessly advocated for them.

Why do we militarize cancer or other diseases? Why do we use terms such as “fight,” “battle,” “combat,” and “defeat” to describe the experience of potentially terminal illness? This terminology offers only two possible outcomes: winning or losing. It always saddens me when I read or hear about people who have “lost their battle” to cancer or another horrible illness. Does this mean that they did not fight hard enough or were not strong enough? I think not. I am a cancer survivor (another militarized term).

Why am I still here? I am pretty sure I did not fight any harder than others who went through a similar or worse experience.

The history of the war on cancer dates to the National Cancer Act of 1971, enacted by former President Richard Nixon. The act supported finding a cure for cancer through funding for research aimed at understanding cancer biology and developing more effective treatments (National Cancer Institute, 2021). Unquestionably, the National Cancer Act has led to progress in understanding cancer biology, risk factors, and treatments for some cancers, but there has been little progress in reducing the overall mortality rate of cancer. Meanwhile, patients with cancer continue to “battle” and “fight” with everything they have, trying to defeat the disease.

As an oncology nurse, I have always felt that I help cure patients, and if that does not happen, I advocate for them to have a peaceful and comfortable death. Not every patient with cancer gets to ring the victory bell. Death does not mean defeat. It is past time to end the war on cancer. It is possible to heal in all things without war.

My dear friend Catherine Lyons, MS, RN, NEA-BC, did not lose to anything, least of all cancer. In the week before her death, she was the recipient of the Oncology Nursing Society’s highest honor, the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award. She received this honor for her contributions to research and patient care throughout her distinguished oncology career, which included leadership positions at the National Cancer Institute and three major cancer research institutions (Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, James P. Wilmot Cancer Center at the University of Rochester in New York, and Smilow Cancer Center at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut). She influenced countless oncology nurses throughout her career, and she did so through inclusion, advocacy, and example, not through waging war.

With the permission of the family, the author dedicates this article to Catherine Lyons, MS, RN, NEA-BC.

RESOURCES

■ City of Hope

Reflects on the 50th anniversary of the National Cancer Act of 1971
www.cityofhope.org/breakthroughs/the-war-on-cancer-at-50-where-are-we

■ National Cancer Institute

Provides a wide range of information and resources for people with cancer
www.cancer.gov

■ War on Cancer

Offers an online support community for patients with cancer
waroncancer.com

REFERENCE

National Cancer Institute. (2021). *National Cancer Act of 1971*.
<https://www.cancer.gov/about-nci/overview/history/national-cancer-act-1971>

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oncology; nursing; war on cancer; terminology

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