The fight is on: military metaphors for cancer may harm patients

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Cancer Research UK (CRUK) wants people to “show us your fight face” by posting their selfies on Twitter to raise money for its “life-saving research to bring forward the day when all cancers are cured.” In Glasgow, earlier this year, an advertising agency working for the Beatson Cancer Centre declared on billboards, “Be full of hope. Be courageous. Be ready to fight,” adding that it was “determined to beat cancer.”

CRUK says it has a “war chest” for research funding. Many patient-bloggers on its website describe “victories” over cancer. The charity describes research that “recruits viruses for cancer battle,” under the heading “Let’s beat cancer sooner.” The advertising agency for CRUK’s fun runs said that it aimed to transform them “from a gathering of women in pink” to an “army who run, dance, and sing.” The agency said lines like “Cancer! We’re coming to get you” and “Oi! Cancer! You. Me. Outside. Now” were “designed to have cancer quaking in its rubbish boots.”

Many types of cancers are not curable; thousands of people are living with “the enemy.” In the unlikely event that “all cancers are cured,” humans will still die. No one needs to be told what their attitude to illness should be—least of all by advertising agencies.

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ Group policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: I’m an NHS GP partner, with income partly dependent on QOF points. I’m a part-time undergraduate tutor at the University of Glasgow. I’ve authored a book and earned from broadcast and written freelance journalism. I’m an unpaid patron of Healthwatch. I make a monthly donation to Keep Our NHS Public. I’m a member of MedAct. I’m occasionally paid for travel, and accommodation to give talks or have locum fees paid to allow me to give talks but never for any drug or public relations company. I was elected to the national council of the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2013.

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