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Conflicts: In addition to the potential conflicts posed by my ties to industry that are listed, during the years 2001-2009 I was a paid consultant for: Eli Lilly,

Bristol Myers Squibb, Janssen, Ovation, Pfizer, makers of each of the atypicals in use or being tested.

The Irsome Myths of Cancer

Each disease seems to have its own non-biological baggage, its special taboos, its fantasies, its degrees of social acceptance, its myths of origin, its apocryphal tales of inheritance.

Cancer, however, is no quirky myth. Sometime during their lifetimes, about one American in five will be afflicted with systemic cancer. It is conservatively estimated that 460,000 Americans die annually of the disease.

Cancer generally arrives unannounced, entering our body without first knocking. Often, a routine laboratory or X-ray procedure proclaims the sobering presence of an uninvited intruder called cancer. And the news changes us, sometimes irreversibly so.

It is a stealth disease; but surely it is not communicable, and yet some of us treat it as though it were a malevolent contagion. Watch when relatives or friends visit a newly-diagnosed cancer patient in the hospital. They will often place their chairs at a distance from the bedside, if they visit at all.

Cancer, in truth, is more than a tangible disease: it is a state of mind, sadly a cause for societal quarantine; even to some a punitive judgment. It is a disease not to be discussed freely or accepted neutrally. When Aunt Minnie dies of breast cancer the world is told that she succumbed "after a lengthy illness." No disease possesses as many euphemisms as cancer.

Cancer is a humiliating disease, involving intensely private visceral organs such as uterus or prostate or breast. Cancer is a punishing disease since its therapies often deprive us of the very organs that give us our gender-identity, our sense of intactness, wholeness, even corporeal beauty. And, after treatment, we often emerge as less than whole, nor to the world, wholesome.

In the minds of many, cancer is not thought of as an intrinsic disease or even a metabolic failing but as an alien invader, a malignant stranger assaulting the citadel of our bodies, an unwelcome aggressor almost extraterrestrial in character infesting us, consuming us, an obscene predator with neither compassion nor feelings. Most people hear cancer not as a word but as a sentence, a death sentence.

Living with cancer sounds almost like "living with Sylvester" as though the cancer were a separate entity much like a boarder in a small boarding house, perhaps like an interloping stranger with his own identity card. It is astonishing, too, of the frequency with which military metaphors are employed when defining or describing cancer and its therapies: Nixon's war against cancer; it is often called an invasive disease, a malignant ailment requiring a crusade, a killer disease. We don't manage cancer the way we manage psoriasis or asthma; with cancer we attack it, which perhaps justifies heroic interventions. And when someone finally succumbs to cancer the obituary—if it mentions cancer at all—will note with sorrow that Mr. X "lost his battle with cancer" or "succumbed after a lengthy siege."

How pervasive is the mythology of cancer? How, in general, is this disease viewed? Certainly as a "taint" upon the family much as hemophilia and Huntington's disease are construed as genealogical missteps to be assigned to the family attic or closet. Cancer, curiously, is thought of as a middle-class disease although substantive epidemiological data would show that the highest frequencies of most cancers burden the poorest classes of citizens.

Whom do we blame when we fall victim to Lyme disease? At best, to the wandering tick than transmitted the disease to us. Certainly the bizarre thought that Lyme disease is a moral failing never crossed our minds. Most adults ascribe their usual illnesses to random happenstance rather than moral lapse or divine wrath. Indeed, with the great majority of diseases afflicting humans, the thought of blame never materializes, except perhaps with the sexually transmitted infections. But how often does the victim of cancer ask: "What did I do to get this?" or worse, "What did I do to deserve this?" And the ultimate unanswerable question: "Why me?"

Cancer is undeniably a burden partly because our imperfect bodies, unintelligently designed in many ways, react excessively to certain external forces such as solar rays, X-rays or particular toxins abetted by certain inheritable vulnerabilities. In the majority of human cancers, a very secular, mundane cause can be assigned. But fertile human imagination, knowing no statutes of limitation, adds unnecessary impediments transforming cancer from a serious disease into a metaphor for moral inadequacy, deadly astrological influences, urban rot and even alien invasions. This might be amusing to an objective sociologist but the humor of being placed in the same category as a leper is lost upon a person afflicted with that very human disease called cancer. The cancer patient has sufficient, tangible problems to confront without the unwarranted burden of despairing guilt.

Cancer should not be disguised as something morally sinister; it remains resolutely within the domain of abnormal biological activity and is ultimately solvable by rational interventions and simple compassion.

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Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, and spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

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