

## Editorial

# Myths

Myths are perceived realities with no empirical evidence much like the world of a schizophrenic, where real-life characters assume different avatars and play by their own rules. Myths are fables. They are no fabricated false needs. Myths and fables have been culturally part of humanity since eons. Myths have facilitated explaining phenomenon's which were poorly understood or may be such as dreams, fulfilled subconscious needs, and desires. The phenomenon of myth making is universal. It still prevails. There are some common myths and myth-making related to cancer as well.

The diagnosis of cancer evokes a cascade of emotions of which intimation of mortality is the most terrifying. Possible loss of function, prospects of mutilation, a prolonged treatment, persistent uncertainty, and an awareness of huge economic burden creates an unparalleled upheaval. Coping, could be a rational approach or one may lean on religious beliefs, metaphors and myth making. Religious beliefs help in coping. An elaborate myth-making sometimes fulfills an innate need to spiritualize the ennui. Michel Higgins very succinctly puts it his talk in 2014. In Dublin, the context however was the First World War. It has a resonance in our war against cancer. "What imagining and remembering have in common is myth making; one, remembering is often initiated, so as to achieve a healing, find a rationalization; construe an event in such a way as to be both a warm cloak for self and a dagger for threatening the other. The other imagining needs myth to retain belief, not merely as an assurance or reassurance, but as a mechanism for the retention of hope in the unrealized possibilities of being human, truly free, in emancipator, celebratory, joyous coexistences, with and for others" (Michel D. Higgins. 2014 Dublin).

Thus, it is a part of the healing process one where rationalizing denial of treatment or deny the disease itself is not riddled with dilemmas itself. Cancer as a demon to be fought and defeated is a common refrain. It has even entered the official lexicon of NCI. One does not talk of diabetes mellitus as a demon to be defeated but is merely addressed as an illness to be treated. Myths abound when mystery clouds the understanding.

Furthermore, myths create a narrative on which the author has a total control. This sense of power itself is adequate to overcome the feeling of being overwhelmed by cancer. A group of people identifying pharmaceutical companies as Dathvedar and medical oncologists as his soldiers in their own mythical narrative perhaps leads to a catharsis and a sense of well-being! A sense of power over corporate behemoth is secured.

Myths are generally understood as essentially not true. Hence, there is always an attempt to sieve myth from facts. The popular myths in the area of oncology are many, but strangely universal. Chemotherapy aids disease spread, a biopsy makes a tumor grow faster, cell phone use leads to cancer, radiation therapy is hot and burns and so on are the myths or misconceptions. The basis for these alternate realities is in fact an extrapolation of some misunderstood observations. In general, myths such as above amplify exponentially like memes. Most patients receiving radiation therapy are apprehensive about normal tissue damage. The perception is that normal tissue is damaged with radiation, unlike surgery. This apprehension is involved in creating marketing strategies for very expensive machines like "cyber-knife. Cyber-knife radiation equipment quite mythically turns into a knife, which cuts and not a source of ionizing radiation. Hence is the care of gamma knife." The allusion to a knife puts patients in familiar terrain. Now, it is a known devil. Myths not only help to advertise but assuage the frightened patients. The myth of tumor growing faster following biopsy, or surgical procedure with blood spilling may have its origin in the story of demon "Raktabeeja." Raktabeeja had the power to proliferate every time a drop of blood touched the soil. It is Kali in her fierce incarnation slays to him by not letting a single drop of blood getting spilled. It is possible that such myths located in the subconscious of the people transform as a separate myth to handle the existential dilemmas. For instance, most Indian women do not relate breast cancer with deodorant sprays. However, karmic cycles are invoked by many Indian to deal with death and cancer and affliction with cancer. The mortality and vulnerability of their Gods in human forms

**Nagraj G. Huilgol**

Department of  
Radiation Oncology,  
Dr. Balabhai Nanavati  
Hospital, Mumbai,  
Maharashtra, India

**For correspondence:**  
Dr. Nagraj G. Huilgol,  
Department of  
Radiation Oncology,  
Dr. Balabhai Nanavati  
Hospital, S.V. Road,  
Vile Parle (W),  
Mumbai - 400 056,  
Maharashtra, India.  
E-mail: [nagrajhuilgol@gmail.com](mailto:nagrajhuilgol@gmail.com)

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Huilgol: Myths in oncology

in familiar epics and myths help assuage the anxieties of death and dying.

Mythology with its magical and fantastical properties of heroes, devils, and fights generally leaves an indelible impression on the subconscious mind. That's why, modern mythologies like Star Wars and Lord of the rings and matrix, which deal with the conflicts of good versus evil, greed, justice in the face of oppression become a box office hits. Some of the cancer patients may impersonate the super hero in their

fantasy to fight cancer. Few others may create their own fantasies in which they dwell most comfortably.

Both counselors and oncologists can facilitate healing by nudging their myths but not losing site of the ultimate responsibility to patients.

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