



Denial in Cancer—*Salutary or Deleterious*

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Revive, relive, reminisce

‘I looked at my physician, in trepidation and hope,
When he pronounced it “cancer”, I didn’t know how to
cope;
The drive home misty with tears made me mope,
Would it make my years a misery, will the end be filled
with dope?
Fitfully that night I slept, while to the news my mind
said “nope”,
But in the dewy morning freshness, I was ready to climb
the steep slope’.

‘Today my doctor gently pronounced, my son has blood
cancer,
I am stunned, positive he is mistaken: perhaps, it’s just a
fever;
There isn’t a chance in hell, the future-soccer star’s a
goner,
I will walk to the end of the earth, till I prove the opin-
ion’s a bummer;
We will cheer the match today—share popcorn, shout
above the clamour,
Come winter, he’ll build a grinning snowman, while I
enjoy a sundowner’.

‘I have known this strong athletic man, for four score
and seven years of his life,
The unshakeable foundation of our home, a strong pillar
in moments of strife;
His stoic face in grimace, heard the ‘bad news’ in com-
pany of his wife,
Rose dignified, walked away, clammed up—the silence
you could cut with a knife;
With children, grandchildren, faraway friends from the
Isle of Fife,
I ruminate and debate if the denial will only end in the
afterlife?’

‘My sister told me today, it was time that I should pray,
For she heard the doctor say, the cancer’s to her brain
made its way;
We have resolved in the hours grey, not to yield to
soothsay,
We will swim this tide, relive sibling memories: imbued
with spirits gay;
When the time is on us, hand-in-hand: face the parting
that fateful day,
My life replete with memories; she too will cherish from
an abode far away...’

Cancer, in common with other life-threatening or life-modifying illnesses, evokes strong psycho-emotional reactions from patients, their families, and society [1]. Denial is one of the significant reactions both the oncologist and psychologist need to identify and address. This reaction can be salutary when it gives way to acceptance or a strong will to surmount the immediate treatment effects and change attitudes and lifestyle. More often, unfortunately, it can impact adversely, leading to a range of reactions from nonchalance, euphoria, and avoidance of

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therapy by the patient or caregiver, to depression and reclusive behaviour [2].

As healthcare givers in the hospital or community, recognising and supporting this phase of ‘breaking bad news’ can significantly influence outcomes. These poems reflect on the manifold manifestations of denial—in the short term, a panacea; in the long term, a deterrent to recovery or living life with cancer.

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References

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