Surgery and Metaphor

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Tamsin Hartley, coach and Clean Language facilitator, has just had an excellent article, Cutting Edge Metaphors, published in Journal of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland. [1]

That got me thinking about surgery and metaphor. The word ‘surgery’ itself has metaphorical roots being derived from the Greek for ‘hand’ and ‘work’ – handiwork you might say.

Surgery has often been used as a metaphor.

In Macbeth surgery has a clear political meaning. Interestingly, although Shakespeare’s characters readily refer to surgeons, no surgeon even gets a walk-on part in a Shakespeare play.[2]

Freud often used surgical metaphors where the psychoanalyst is the surgeon and psychoanalysis a carefully wielded scalpel.[3]

Lakoff has shown how military operations in the Gulf War were portrayed as hygienic, with bombing raids referred to as surgical strikes to take out the enemy.[4]

On a more mundane level, one struggling author said “Writing is like performing surgery on yourself without anesthesia”, while a teacher thought “teaching grammar is root canal surgery”.

Fabri at University of South Florida College of Medicine has proposed that ocean sailing could be used as a metaphor to enhance surgical training.[5]

At first sight there is nothing subtle about the metaphor ‘this surgeon is a butcher’. However it takes a detailed and complex analysis by Grady and his colleagues to explain what we intuitively grasp: the metaphor is a damning statement about an incompetent practitioner.[6]

Pascal Vouhé was more nuanced in his presidential address to the European Association for Cardio-Thoracic Surgery when he compared a surgeon to a musician since the goal of surgery is to restore the patient’s normal physiological harmony.[7]

Surgeons might also like to note that a group of their colleagues make much more use of metaphor than is common in the medical profession. Can you guess which?

When general medical dictionaries and encyclopedic texts from seven specialties – dermatology, internal medicine, general surgery, orthopedics, pathology, pediatrics and radiology – were examined, ”A total of 375 metaphoric signs were collected, the overwhelming majority (66%) of which were radiologic in reference”. [8]

In discussions with radiologists, it might be worth remembering that they may well interpret images both concretely and metaphorically.
References


or read the article at: [cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/325/](http://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/325/)


7 European Association for Cardio-Thoracic Surgery Daily News, Tuesday 14 September 2010.