

Cancer culture has changed, but not necessarily for the better

September 4 2015, by Lee Page

Cancer has lost its stigma but that has not necessarily made things easier for patients, according to new research from the University of Warwick.

In a paper called 'The Bad Patient: Estranged Subjects of the Cancer Culture' published today in a special issue of the journal *Body and Society*, Professor Deborah Lynn Steinberg, considers changes in the "cancer culture" and the ways in which perceptions have altered in recent years.

In a similar vein to Barbara Ehrenrich and other recent commentators, Steinberg notes that there has been a dramatic shift in society's attitude towards cancer, but the de-stigmatisation of the disease has not necessarily made things easier for patients. It is true that the media has been saturated with sympathetic portrayals of people with cancer, but this has been accompanied by a new set of social expectations that bind the cancer patient and that extend the reach of 'heroic battle' even to those, as in—perhaps most famously—the case of Angelina Jolie, who do not in fact have cancer—the 'pre-vivor'. Indeed, Jolie has become the 'face' of [breast cancer](#) and survivorship. This was made possible, Steinberg argues, because aside from her own cultural capital as a celebrity, Jolie entered a cultural space that was already primed to position her individual choice as an overriding cultural symbol and as part of a larger heroic narrative.

Steinberg's study focuses on one telling, and in the USA ubiquitous, strand of this larger cultural space: advertising by prominent [cancer](#)

[treatment](#) centres. Her article closely considers the language and visual repertoire of the "cancer culture," the moral principles and propositions expressed and assumed in it, and the way these ideas are turned into imperatives directed at the cancer patient.

'The Bad Patient' speaks to the ways in which medicine, commerce, and media combine to produce an 'ideal patient' that not only obscures the realities of cancer treatment, but also produces a set of popular assumptions and expectations that leave patients having to negotiate cultural pressures as well as clinical imperatives. Steinberg argues that advertising across the spectrum of charity activism, medical insurance and hospital services has set a pervasive cultural tone—and has created a preferred way of thinking about cancer. In this frame of reference, the ideal patient is self-assertive, indefatigable, a warrior of certainty—invested in—and able to transcend—the rigours of cancer treatment. Survival is presented as a right of passage, the earned outcome of a patient's will to live and willingness to 'battle'. Lost in this formulation is the 'bad patient' who is not 'at war' with cancer, who would not view cancer as a nefarious personification, separate from herself, or who cannot (or will not) fulfil the imperatives of action and affect that make up cancer's requisite 'bargain for survival'.

Steinberg notes that advertising is a subtly powerful medium—because it operates on a terrain of everyday and unquestioned assumptions and because it is so central as an apparatus of cultural expectation. Across the landscape of everyday representations, we can see that the cancer patient has become both an inspirational and aspirational symbol, as well as a sign of the times both within and beyond the confines of cancer treatment and survivorship.

As Steinberg suggests, the idea that defiance and will are what produces outcomes – whether that is survivorship for individuals or 'curing cancer sooner' as the current Race for the Cure campaign would suggest—is

seductive. It invests the imagery with moral capital and social recognition; the [cancer patient](#) as culture warrior becomes a deserving life.

That these ideas can stand in for (and produce) 'survival' is a powerful lure and an extraordinary sham. They normalise a callous set of social values—that repudiate pain, ignore reality, deny death, and reject the 'failed'. The [cancer](#) warrior as cultural symbol is, Steinberg suggests, the duplicitous 'brave face' of cruel times.

More information: "The Bad Patient: Estranged Subjects of the Cancer Culture." *Body & Society*, 1357034X15586240, first published on June 29, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/1357034X15586240](https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15586240)

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