



Words can harm, and they can heal



Andreea Calude

Senior lecturer in linguistics at the University of Waikato

About a decade ago, Welsh doctor and academic Nefyn Williams wrote an editorial, “Words that harm: words that heal”, about a patient asking him whether the damage to his painful knees, which had been diagnosed as *degenerative change*, was *wear and tear*. Williams highlighted how poor this choice of words was

In his view, *wear and tear*, as well as *degenerative change*, designated a passive, helpless state in which the patient can but wait for the damage to increase and spread, engulfed in a gloomy prognosis of ensuing pain and disability. Yet this was not the inevitable future for his patient.

There is hope for osteoarthritis patients, as roughly one-third go on to reverse some of the damage. Williams warned that “the words we use to describe illness are very important”, and indeed a wealth of studies indicates that our perceived understanding of a potential illness greatly influences both



Musician Pere Wihongi initiated the GotYaDot campaign to encourage young Māori to get vaccinated against Covid-19.

Language Matters

the outcome of the illness and our way of coping with it.

Fast forward to early last month, when young New Zealanders were encouraged in a *1News* article to head down to Eden Park for their *dot*. The *GotYaDot* campaign (<https://gotyadot.co.nz>) is a Māori-led initiative encouraging youth to get vaccinated against Covid-19, to *connect the dots* and protect their community.

Initiated by musician Pere Wihongi, from Te Tai Tokerau, the *Ira Dot* (*ira* being the Māori word for “dot”) was born, following Wihongi’s observation that the word *vaccine* needed to be replaced by

something more positive. Wihongi explains that *vaccine* was “language that ha[d] become triggering”.

The campaign went on to achieve massive success, in another indication of how powerful the spin of words can be. While *vaccines* and *jabs* are reminiscent, for some, of painful mandate debates and of piercing needles coming forcefully at you, who could be scared of a dot?

From inevitable cartilage damage to repackaging of painful vaccines, medical discourse is particularly apt in revealing the power of language in shaping our view of reality. Specifically, medicine is laden with two linguistic strategies: metaphors, as discussed above, and distancing strategies.

In a previous article, I described Covid-19 metaphors. It turns out metaphors are everywhere in medicine, not just in connection to Covid-19. This is because illness and disease make us uncomfortable, and we resort to metaphors and euphemisms to avoid openly discussing them. Secondly, metaphors offer excellent bypasses for medical jargon unfamiliar to most patients.

Another strategy in medical settings is distancing. To appear more objective, doctors use distancing language: *The CT scan shows an unusual growth*. But the CT scan did not perform or interpret itself. Consequence of placing patients in the background and the disease on centre stage: *the tumour has returned*.

What’s really odd is that not only does the wording used by doctors affect the patients and their outcomes, but it also seems to conversely reshape the physician’s own view of the patient – often seen as a passive passenger, merely experiencing what is happening to them, *the wear and tear*, with little ownership or control over it.

Williams was really on to something: words can harm, and they can heal. The language used does matter, and nowhere is the evidence of the tight relationship between body and mind more compelling than within the realm of medicine.

Contact Us

Got a language query? Email opinion@stuff.co.nz. Not all queries will be answered.

TORONTO STAR

Vatican must return artefacts and records

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Sometimes the Vatican can appear so obsessed with papal bulls and encyclicals, and its frequent rounds of damage control, that it forgets the gospel according to Robert Fulghum: “Don’t take things that aren’t yours.” “Put things back where you found them.”

It turns out that popes over the decades – especially Pius XI – have amassed hundreds of items from indigenous peoples in Canada, including an antique seal-skin kayak from the Western Arctic.

While the Vatican says the kayak was a gift, the statement said, “it is not the

Viewpoint

‘Pope’s kayak’ and rightfully belongs to the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, where its lessons and significance can benefit Inuvialuit culture and communities”.

Grace, good manners and basic decency – not to mention the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which supports the repatriation of such objects – suggest that returning the kayak is the proper thing to do.

And the kayak is hardly the most important thing Pope Francis needs to order returned to Canada. For the better part of a century, the Catholic church, and

agents of other faiths, operated residential schools on behalf of the federal government. Those schools became a source of trauma to indigenous peoples and of abiding shame for the country. Even now, unmarked graves of innocents are being found across the country.

And just as there is no reconciliation without truth and owning up, there can be no peace for families and communities if they are denied access to material that might explain what happened to their loved ones.

It’s time to give back the kayak. And turn over the residential school records.