

The Epidemic of "Epidemics"

by Brenda Denzler

This country is the land of superlatives. Everything we do, everything we are, is framed in terms of being "the best." Unless, of course, it's something we don't want to be or do, in which case it's framed as being "the worst." No half-measures for us! We are gung-ho, all the way, committed and bought-in! I mean, even our current POTUS frames himself as "the smartest" man—and apparently a respectable number of the electorate agreed (at least at first). It's an idea that the American people are in love with. If it's superlative, we own it!

This popular predilection toward the superlative can be found even in medicine. Yes, indeed. Even in a discipline supposedly governed by the no-nonsense rules of strict scientific thought, bleached free of confounding things like emotions and attitudes, superlatives have crept in. Watching the medical press, as I do, I've noticed that every other disease, condition, procedure or form of testing is being described as part of an "epidemic."

The epidemic getting the most popular press right now is the opioid epidemic. A Google search on the term yields more than 34 million hits, and of the first five links offered, three of them are to government sites. As a measure of the idea's currency, the new "Roseanne" TV show has launched a story line where Rosie becomes addicted to the pain pills she's taking for her bad knee.

For those of us who find the expense or the short-term hazards of prescription drug abuse hard to get excited about, an epidemic we can really sink our teeth into (pun intended) is the obesity epidemic. This one's a real participatory kind of thing, if people-watching at Wal-Mart is any indicator. A Google search on this public health threat nets 901,000 hits, and of the first five, two are to government sites and one is a link to Harvard.

The AARP reports in its May 2018 Bulletin that hearing loss is our nation's "silent and growing epidemic," having more of a negative impact on daily life than the aforementioned obesity, diabetes, strokes or "even cancer." (Thank goodness I just got cancer!)

Public health officials are said to be "bracing" for a whooping cough epidemic in the spring this year, according to Healthline.com. Pink eye doesn't happen just as "outbreaks" but sounds much more dire when it is described as occurring in epidemics, as it is on Medscape.com. A podiatrist's website even solemnly proclaims that ingrown toenails have become an epidemic in this country!

The idea of something being epidemic is so compelling that, of course, marketers have to get into it. Alopecia, otherwise known as hair loss, gets some notice as an epidemic in medical journals like The Lancet, but there are far, far more commercial websites where it is proclaimed an epidemic capable of remedy if you just use their product.

Some diseases, however, having been viewed with alarm as reaching epidemic proportions, are now being downgraded. You'd think it might be the ingrown toenails, but no.... It's things like breast and prostate cancer. It's not that there's more of them than ever, the public health wonks are saying now. It's just that over-use of tests like the PSA or mammograms are letting us see the disease earlier. Most of the time very early-stage prostate and breast cancer are not "cancer" at all, but pre-cancers. As such, they do not usually go on to become killers, so there's no real need to find them early.

Voila! The epidemic is now transferred from the disease to the tests for the disease, and the solution is easy: quit testing so much. (Patient: "Doctor, it hurts when I do this." Doctor: "Then don't do that!") I guess what we don't know won't hurt us...unless yours is one of the pre-cancers that does go on to become a threat to your life.

Put anything you want into a search engine along with the word "epidemic" and you are sure to find the two terms used together more often than you'd think. Everything, it would seem, can be—and usually is—described as being part of an epidemic. We have, in fact, an epidemic of "epidemics."

What does this hyperbole get us, and where will it end?

I am not suggesting that whooping cough,

opioid addiction, hearing loss or any of the other "epidemics" I've noted are inconsequential matters. My mother had whooping cough when she was an older child (not an infant, thankfully), and she remembered it vividly as being a terrible experience. My musically gifted father suffers from some significant hearing loss, and I'm quite aware of how this has impacted his life, not to mention how hard it is for everyone around him. I, myself, am one of those overweight people you'd watch at Wal-Mart and shake your head about. Heck, I had an intractable, recurrent ingrown toenail when I was a teen and had to have it surgically removed several times. No fun, believe you me!

My point is, I guess, that when everything becomes an epidemic, then nothing is an epidemic. Our national obsession with framing things in the superlative needs to be reined in so that we have more nuanced ideas about how things really are. As a suggestion, I think we could start at the White House, and then work our way down.

Meanwhile, as I wait for that particular miracle to occur, I have run up against an "epidemic" again. In the middle of May, I was diagnosed with a cancerous lymph node on my throat that has metastatic cells in it—cells from somewhere, but they don't know where, for sure. The cancerous cells don't look like lymph node cells. They're assuming the errant cells are from my thyroid gland, even though an ultrasound and biopsy of the thyroid don't strongly support this.

Of course, I've been doing my usual research. Imagine my surprise (not!) to find that we are in the middle of an epidemic of thyroid cancer in this country—not, they've decided, because it's happening more frequently. Mostly it's because ultrasound is being used so often to image thyroid glands, finding indolent cancers that, if undiscovered and thus left untreated, would most likely never become dangerous.

So what do I have? Do I have an unthreatening thyroid gland that was targeted for an ultrasound solely because of its proximity to a bad lymph node, but is really OK? Is this a case of my thyroid falling victim to the "epidemic"

of thyroid cancer screening? Or do I really have a problem, not just in the lymph node but in the gland as well? The language of "epidemics" does nothing to make my situation any clearer.

Brenda Denzler was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2009. She became a cancer survivor on the very day she was diagnosed.



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