‘Virtual colonoscopy’ – what’s in a name?

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After hearing about the risks associated with colonoscopy, a patient asks “What about virtual colonoscopy?” The message she received is clear – there is a test that is essentially equivalent to a real colonoscopy but without the risks or discomfort that are associated with the actual procedure. Computed tomography (CT) colonography or spiral CT scanning of the colon is presented to the public with a label that includes an embedded message – ‘this is a good test that rivals colonoscopy.’

Mislabelling has been fairly common in medicine, often the result of a misunderstanding of the underlying cause of a symptom or disease. Dyspepsia (ie, indigestion) is not really due to a defect of the digestive process, and we have come to understand that ‘heart burn’ has nothing to do with the heart. An elderly physician once told me that in the early days of his practice people were said to die of ‘acute indigestion’, a term eventually replaced with ‘myocardial infarction’ or ‘heart attack’ when we came to understand what was actually happening to these patients.

However, ‘virtual colonoscopy’ is not a label that comes from a misunderstanding of its nature or value. It is a label directed at the consumer and actually seeks to place the procedure in a position of some equivalency with colonoscopy. Is this OK? Is it acceptable to embed a marketing message in the name of an option for a consumer who needs to make an important choice among a range of screening options? Such labelling is, after all, quite effective at influencing consumers.

I suggest that we cease and desist in our use of the term ‘virtual colonoscopy’ and call the procedure what it is. It is CT colonography, or spiral or helical CT scanning of the colon. This is the language that I use when discussing this procedure with patients.

As physicians, we should strive to make the language of medicine as objective, accurate and meaningful as we can, understanding that ultimately we may have little impact on the lingua franca.
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