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Metaphors of Menopause in Medicine

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of**

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

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2010

Abstract

Medical textbooks have previously represented women's bodies and menopause life transitions by using notions of 'machine productivity' and 'machine breakdown' (Martin, 1987). This study aimed to explore whether these representations have changed, especially given recent HRT clinical trial results. Eight relevant compulsory medical textbooks for first and second year medical students at two New Zealand Universities were identified. A Foucauldian discourse analysis (Parker, 1990) was undertaken on relevant content to identify representations of menopause, HRT, women's bodies, and ageing. Five major discourses were employed in the textbooks in descriptions of menopause and HRT: failure, estrogen deficiency as disease; HRT as saviour; obscurity and the new discovery discourse. Menopause continues to be represented as resulting from a 'failure' of a machine-like body. Although the recent HRT clinical trials were reported as a serious risk factor in half of the textbooks, HRT was also represented as a saviour particularly against postmenopausal osteoporosis. The discovery of 'new' drugs to 'treat' HRT and the 'postmenopausal' patient were heralded with much excitement. Medical textbooks continue to use failure discourses to describe women's bodies at menopause. New risk-based HRT assessments for 'patients' with menopause 'symptoms' are promoted. These portrayals reinforce linear and reductionist ways of thinking about menopause and women at midlife and provide few spaces for resistance or alternative constructions to more accurately reflect women's embodied worlds.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my supervisor, Dr Antonia Lyons, who was my inspiration for embarking on this academic journey. Her dedicated support, guidance and friendship throughout this challenging endeavour have enabled me to appreciate how rewarding it is to achieve this goal.

Special thanks to my father, Joe, who has an unwavering belief in my ability to succeed at whatever I do and to my daughters, Geena, Alice and Lauren, who encouraged me every day to be myself but keep writing. I am also grateful to Chris for his generosity in always lending me books from the Hay library and his wise advice, enthusiasm and ongoing support for me to complete this project.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Barbara Seaman (1935 – 2008), a principal founder of the women's health feminism movement who persistently and fearlessly challenged medical authority in order to give women more informed and safer choices for their healthcare.

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