

Defence of the Living Dead: zombies as vectors for transmitting positive health messages

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The study by Houghton et al (NZMJ: 129; 1430) should be of great interest to all health professionals studying the zombie phenomenon. However, the authors may have been too hasty in dismissing zombies as vectors for transmitting positive health messages.¹ In the process, they may also have missed an opportunity for alleviating health and social issues that blight the (un)lives of the often overlooked zombie patient population (see Commentary 1). There is little doubt that zombies are portrayed negatively in the media and in popular culture. Some reasons for this—transmitting highly virulent pathogens, consuming human flesh (see Commentary 2), and bringing about the end of civilization—are objectively verifiable. However, zombies are also unfairly associated with such things as failing banks, moribund national economies and slow depopulation of isolated small towns.^{2,3} (If there's one thing that zombies never do, it's slow depopulation of isolated small towns).

Many factors may explain such unfair portrayals. It could be argued that the loss of verbal and fine motor skills in zombification leaves this group unable to articulate its own interests. However, biologically deterministic explanations for observed inequities risks excusing, and even justifying, societal biases. For example, zombies may not have the conventional attractiveness that draws positive coverage.⁴ Like others who have met violent ends, they may not fit the image of the 'ideal victim', and may be portrayed negatively for an 'extra-legal' reason.^{5,6} (To wit, the lamentable tendency to rise again and consume the temporarily still-living). They may be afflicted by stigma surrounding their condition.⁷ It therefore falls on health

professionals to advocate for zombies. In light of the above, using zombies as a means of transmitting positive health messages potentially both empowers and destigmatises this population, and should not be cast aside lightly. Failing to integrate zombies into society could come back to bite us—as it were.

Houghton et al note that using zombie epidemic metaphors to reinforce disaster preparedness leads young Americans to make unprompted associations with weaponry. Where the authors may err is in attributing this to zombies. Possession of weaponry (particularly firearms) plays a central role in Americans' culture and national psyche. Efforts to combat (or even study) gun violence have been fiercely resisted as affronts to American liberty.⁸ Furthermore, it has been argued that 'zombie apocalypse' is often a code for American cultural anxieties such as racial conflict, crime or societal upheaval.⁹ It is not therefore unreasonable that a proportion of Americans would seek to arm themselves in any uncertain (or routine, or social) situation. This effect may not occur in other cultural settings.

Furthermore, by dismissing the role of zombies in disaster preparedness, we risk rushing to slam the door on zombies in other contexts. (Again. Sigh.) Zombies may transmit many positive health messages. In an age of rising obesity and physical inactivity, zombies relentlessly reinforce the survival benefits of regular cardiovascular training. In this context, they also educate on the difference between absolute and relative risk reduction. (While being able to outrun zombies is an absolute survival benefit, there is also a statistically

significant advantage to simply being able to outrun the other guy). Zombies may convey the health risks of isolation (“This will be faster if we split up”). Given concerns about the health impacts of climate change, zombies highlight the risks of dismissing dangerous changes in

one’s environment as transient weather phenomena (“It’s probably just the wind”).

In conclusion, health professionals must not prematurely bury the idea of using zombies to convey positive health messages. That, after all, is a fate that zombies themselves know all too well.

Commentary 1

In fact, conventional medical thinking is highly sceptical of the mere existence of zombies. However, there is a dearth of peer-reviewed literature. In the best traditions of evidence-based medicine, we must therefore keep an open mind.¹⁰ This is especially true as zombies have every reason to hide from ‘real humans’—see Commentary 2.

Commentary 2

The prejudicial term ‘cannibalism’ should be avoided. If zombies are no longer human, then ipso facto the consumption of human flesh cannot be cannibalism. Conversely, if zombies are human, our routine reaction to them would violate national laws, international humanitarian conventions, and arguably even the laws of war. One cannot have it both ways.

Competing interests:

The author is parent to rambunctious 2-year-old twin boys. As such, the author has a natural affinity with those bitten by human teeth, dragged untimely from their rest, and condemned to exist in a perpetual shambling and semi-coherent haze. The author self-prescribes a weekly therapeutic dose of *iZombie*.

Disclaimer:

This article does not necessarily represent Waikato DHBs position on the undead. It was written on the author’s own (now severely limited) free time, which probably says a great deal about the author’s priorities.

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