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Metaphors of Menopause in Medicine

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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.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Tables.....	v
List of Figures	v
Chapter 1: Menopause and Hormone Replacement Therapy.....	1
Introduction.....	1
What is Menopause?	1
Physiology	2
Historical Perspective and the Influence of Medicine	6
What is Hormone Replacement Therapy?.....	9
The Story of Estrogen and its Warnings.....	10
Women's Health Initiative.....	13
Summary.....	16
Chapter 2: Feminist Resistances to a Biomedical Menopause	17
Second-wave Feminist Critiques	17
Third-wave Feminist Critiques	18
Post-feminist Critiques	19
Representations of Menopause	21
Summary.....	27
Research Aims	28
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	30
Research Approach	30
Theoretical Framework	32
Medical Textbooks.....	34

Procedure and Analytic Strategy.....	35
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion	35
Failure Discourse	35
Estrogen Deficiency as Disease Discourse.....	35
HRT Saviour Discourse.....	35
Obscurity Discourse	35
New Discovery Discourse	35
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions	35
Limitations & Future Research.....	35
Conclusion	35
References	35

List of Tables

Table 1: Key Sample of Medical Textbooks.....	35
Table 2: Symptoms of Menopause in the Medical Textbooks.....	35

List of Figures

Figure 1: Stages of normal reproductive ageing in women, taken from Soules et al, 2001, p.845	3
Figure 2: Effects of SERMs on estrogen tissues, taken from Page, Curtis, Walker and Hoffman, 2006, p.462	35
Figure 3: Paracrine molecular mechanisms that regulate osteoclasts, taken from Kumar, Abbas and Fausto, 2005, p.1276.....	35
Figure 4: Molecular mechanisms of estrogen receptors, taken from Koeppen and Stanton, 2008, p.781	35
Figure 5: Pathophysiology of postmenopausal and senile osteoporosis, taken from Kumar, Abbas, Fausto and Mitchell, 2007, p.806.....	35