

## Reflections on Moments of Common Reference in Dialogical Communication: Unconfused Collaboration in Unique Contexts

### “A Bright Star Touches Everyone”: A “Moment of Common Reference” among Cancer Patients

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One example of John Shotter’s “moment of common reference” that he discusses in his article “Moments of Common Reference in Dialogic Communication” comes from an incident involving cancer patients and the charity Macmillan Cancer Support (“Macmillan” for short). I had been asked to write a portrait of Macmillan’s former head of research, Jim Elliott, as a contribution to the organization’s collective memory and an acknowledgement of Jim’s achievements over his three and half years in that post. As part of my inquiry, I spoke to a cancer patient called Roger Wilson, and during our phone call Roger happened to relate to me the origin of a new competition for patient-led research:

“I think the story behind that is great fun. It was the second NCRI conference<sup>1</sup>... There was quite a big group round the table, to consider how Macmillan could create a strong focus and something a bit different, something that would stand out. And I think the patient who suggested the competition said: ‘You could fund some research and have a competition’, or something like that. And you could see a sort of a, like one of those, in a cartoon film a little bright star circles round the room and touches everyone on the head, and everybody glows. It was a bit like that.”

***Abstract:** This article is a reflection on Shotter’s concept: “moment of common reference.” It shares one illustration of how a “moment of common reference” emerged among cancer patients and what made it possible.*

Roger went on to describe how those present then discussed the idea of an annual competition for patient-led research, leaving it to Macmillan’s head of research, Jim Elliott, to go away and work out what would actually be achievable, and how.

Judging from Roger’s image of the little star circling round the group, it seems that there was an instantaneous, mutual recognition that a “great idea” had been born. One senses that this “moment of common reference” must have been experienced bodily by those present.

What has happened since seems to confirm the significance of that moment. An annual competition is now well established and continues to generate much excitement. Every year it is open to anyone at the NCRI conference to submit an outline proposal to Macmillan for funding, and every proposal must be endorsed by a patient attending the conference.

In other words, an unplanned, spontaneous moment, where everybody seemed to “glow”, provided a shared grounding for those present: Jim felt moved to go away and work out the practicalities while others took up the idea by contributing original research proposals.

As a result, Macmillan has since funded three patient-led studies each year. One, for example, is about supportive care for head and neck cancer patients and is actually employing a patient to do some of the field research. Another is an examination of whether getting involved as a “patient advocate” has an impact on the survival of the individuals who do it.

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The whole idea continues to evolve, as Roger explains:

“Last year we had proposals which were actually written by patients, whereas the previous year we had proposals which involved patients quite deeply in them but weren’t actually written by patients. So it’s moved the whole issue of patient-led research on a step in quite a dramatic way. And I think once we get into having publications from these studies, they’re going to be seen as quite significant.” (Roger Wilson)

It seems reasonable to conclude that a spontaneous moment of common reference, described so vividly by a witness, marked the beginning of a fruitful collaboration in the pioneering field of patient-led research.

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### **Endnotes**

1. Macmillan is one of several partners in a collaboration known as National Cancer Research Institute or NCRI. According to [www.ncri.org.uk](http://www.ncri.org.uk), “NCRI was set up in 2001 to develop common plans for cancer research and to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. Until NCRI came together there was little joint planning or management of cancer research, and collaborations were patchy. There was no single source of information about the research being carried out, so it was difficult to assess needs for new work.”