Kool-Aid and the Jonestown Tragedy

To the Editor:

In a recent article, variations of a metaphor (“I drank the Kool-Aid a long time ago,” “the lean Kool-Aid has an energizing kick,” “totally bought in and drank the Kool-Aid”) are used both in quotes and in commentary in an analysis of the utility of lean management in emergency medicine. This metaphor is a reference to the Jonestown Massacre.

In 1978, 918 people committed suicide or were murdered in the Jonestown massacre in Guyana. One third of the victims were children. This event claimed the greatest loss of American civilian lives in history and remained so until September 11, 2001. It is unfortunate that the predominant method of suicide and murder at Jonestown (“to drink the Kool-Aid”) has become such a widely used, light-hearted metaphor for blind acceptance of an ideology. It has become pervasive in the American business lexicon.

Like “to fly a plane into a building,” “to drink the Kool-Aid” is an offensive phrase and is inappropriate in a medical publication. Let us hope that not everything that is acceptable in the business world becomes acceptable in medicine.

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1. Millard WB. If Toyota ran the ED. Ann Emerg Med. 2011;57:13A-17A.

In reply:

Thank you for your thoughtful commentary on the use of the phrase “drank the Kool-Aid” in a recent Annals News & Perspective story. We certainly did not mean to diminish or make light of the suffering and death of so many people at Jonestown 33 years ago. We do make a distinction between September 11, 2001, references, a fresh wound in our collective memory, and the Kool-Aid phrase, which has crept into the lexicon during the past 3 decades, whether born of the Jonestown massacre or a slightly different shade of meaning drawn from Tom Wolfe’s Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. We would contend that “drink the Kool-Aid” has slipped its etymologic moorings and simply means what it means: to buy into an ideology wholeheartedly and without reservation, which may have a positive or negative connotation, depending on the context. Examples in our language abound, eg, “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” or “basket case,” the latter British World War I slang for quadruple amputee war wounded.

However, we accept that there is room for debate, and we appreciate being reminded when our choice of phrase has unintended and hurtful meanings to our readers.