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Cancer crusade

MAN AGAINST CANCER: RESEARCH AND PROGRESS

by Bernard Glemser, The Bodley Head, 45s.

Cancer research is variously regarded as "a noble but dull and unrewarding pursuit", as "too complex for anyone not working in the field to understand" and as "an expensive exercise that has been achieving little or nothing during recent years". Moreover, most so-called popular books on the subject fail to provide a more satisfactory image of the subject. This book by an experienced and successful novelist does so handsomely.

Accompanied by his wife and armed with a tape-recorder, Glemser set off to interview scientists in research institutes and hospitals in countries scattered around the globe. From these interviews he has pieced together a series of exciting adventure stories that depict man using all his wits to solve problems closely bound up with the very mystery of life itself. Some of the all too easily overlooked triumphs of cancer research are highlighted, and the hopes, fears, prejudices and conflicting views of the scientists are presented in a way that the layman can understand and which grips his interest.

One story concerns a form of cancer most commonly seen in children in certain parts of Africa. The disease was discovered by Denis Burkitt, a surgeon originally from Northern Ireland, during the early 1960s, and this has proved to be a landmark in cancer research.

Firstly, it is likely to be the first type of human cancer that is shown to be due to infection with a virus—possibly the Epstein-Barr virus. A complex variety of relationships between man and this virus suggests that infection may occur anywhere in the world, and is usually unmarked by illness of any kind. Uncommonly, infection manifests itself as glandular fever (infectious mononucleosis), and very rarely as Burkitt's African lymphoma. Concurrent infection with malaria may be the factor which favours lymphoma development in those infected in Africa, since the geographical areas in which African lymphoma occurs more or less coincide with those in which malaria is endemic. The striking response of some patients with Burkitt's lymphoma to treatment with anti-cancer drugs focused attention on the possibility that the body can sometimes reject a few remaining cancer cells by an immunological mechanism provided that most of the cancer has been destroyed by other means such as surgery or chemotherapy.

The history of cancer research—albeit slightly biased because it is history as perceived by a novelist who is American—is the basis of a lively second chapter. Since this was written, another page of history has turned with a serious cut-back of Government funds for cancer research in the United States. This is a source of immense frustration for many top scientists in the field, but good may come of it if it leads to acceptance that, even when money is more plentiful, problems should be tackled on the basis of

priorities. One hopes that the concept of the crash programme which entails the simultaneous investigation of every combination and permutation of possibility at the same time, has gone for good.

Cancer presents a galaxy of problems and not, as some people imagine, just a single problem. Special problems are associated with particular places, occupations, customs and habits. During the past decade, research on causation and prevention in relation to these special problems has been particularly rewarding and provides Glemser with material for his chapter entitled "Of people and places", "A new kingdom of medicine" (about the discovery of a fascinating new class of chemical carcinogens, the nitrosamines, capable of causing cancer at almost any site in the body), "The case of the depraved turkeys" (about the discovery of aflatoxin, a powerful carcinogen, in ground nuts) and "The case of the tumorous trout" (about the liver cancers that develop in trout fed a diet contaminated with aflatoxin).

In places the book is moving, without being sentimental. The fact that cancer is not a common cause of death in India means only that tuberculosis and other infectious diseases take their own heavy toll. And whilst one reads the account of Glemser's experiences in India, the terrible question pushes itself forward—"What sense does cancer research make against the tragic scene of uncontrolled overpopulation in that part of the world?"

Francis Roe