

The History of the Everlasting “War on Cancer”

Cancer is arguably one of the most pressing issues faced by medicine due to its unpredictable nature and tendency to proliferate rapidly. Therefore, the fight against cancer has been widespread for centuries. However, the term “war on cancer” was only formally accepted in the mid-20th century when key figures such as Sidney Farber, Mary Lasker, and President Richard Nixon entered the scene. They have played instrumental roles in transforming cancer research, treatment, and policy, shaping the trajectory of oncology as we know it today.

Sidney Farber’s Contributions

Sidney Farber, a paediatric pathologist at the children’s hospital in Boston was one of the first people that contributed to the ‘War on Cancer.’ In 1947, as children rapidly contracted and died of leukaemia, his use of a folic acid analog, aminopterin, showed the world that remissions in acute lymphoblastic leukaemia were possible and attainable. It was this glimmer of hope that led to the eventual beginning of the ‘war’ on cancer.

The Laskers

Nearby, in New York City, Mary Lasker, a socialite and philanthropist was getting over the grief of losing her own mother to cancer. Determined to prevent others from enduring the same pain, she turned her personal loss into a mission to revolutionize cancer research. Soon enough, she married Albert Lasker, enabling her to transform her burgeoning cause of defeating cancer once and for all, into a full-blown mission for cancer research. Her tireless advocacy transformed the public and political perception of cancer, making it a national priority. She relentlessly lobbied Congress, urging them to allocate substantial funding for cancer research, which ultimately led to legislative action.

For years, the Laskers worked predominantly without any help from the US government. They established the Lasker Foundation in 1942, to highlight emerging medicine research. This was later followed by the instigation of the Lasker Awards, honouring hundreds of recipients.



The National Cancer Act

Then, in 1971, the Laskers' prayers were answered. President Richard Nixon signed the National Cancer Act, a landmark bill that significantly increased federal funding for research in cancer. Soon after, the National Cancer Institute, the center of the fight against cancer was established. The NCI has since played an instrumental role in many of the advancements in cancer treatment and prevention, and the act symbolised a commitment from the government to tackling one of the most pressing health issues of the time. The passing of this bill was indeed what catapulted the United States of America into the war on cancer.

The National Cancer Act of 1971 therefore is classified as a key turning point in the tumultuous battle against cancer, a disease that is yet to be understood by humanity. Although the efforts of Sidney Farber, Mary Lasker, and President Nixon have greatly improved facilities for medical research, especially that of cancer, it is imperative to note that there still is no real cure for cancer. That being said, the War on Cancer, although far from over, has undoubtedly been shaped by these pioneers and continues to inspire ongoing progress in the field of oncology.



CITATIONS

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