The Story of Cancer: The Film

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Ken Burns Presents

The Story of Cancer
The Emperor of All Maladies
A Film by Barak Goodman

“We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do other things, not because they are easy but because they are hard, because that challenge is one we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone and one we intend to win”.

John F. Kennedy. Rice University, Houston 1962.

Some years ago, at a symposium on cancer, Prof. Peter Taylor, head of the Center for Experimental Medicine of the Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas (IVIC), stated the following: The price that multicellular organisms pay for the joy of reproduce through sex, and not by boring cell division as single-celled organisms, is cancer. This witty assertion explains why only complex organisms with their trillions of cells targeted by a genetic program and control of cell division, are the only ones that can generate a malignant neoplasm. If a single-celled organism moves away from simply program shall enter into chaos and die. On the other hand when, for example, one of the numerous epithelial cells of a multicellular organism achieves to break controls, is triggering cell abnormal growth and, by breaking the basal membrane, will come into contact with the vascular and lymphatic channels; this will allow a group of neoplastic cells to travel to other organs and systems. In that invasion, the powerful machinery of the malignancy will use all their wiles to advance. It will segregate endothelial growth factors to create its own supply and satisfy its voracious dependence of oxygen and glucose. It will enslave the neighboring normal cell to put at its service and will form a parallel structure with its own microecosystem, with unwavering autonomy and, especially, scheduled to be immortal and lethal. This is what has been called cancer from hundreds of years ago.

Understanding the scenarios that explain this phenomenon is a complex task. Cancer specialists must create a mental map that offers the best choice to the patient. This task, as in any specialty, takes years of dedication and study. But it will take, besides the experience, insight into the historical development of this pathology. It is for this reason that we needed someone who counted brilliantly the story of this disease.
In November 2010, a careful reader of the New York Times told me that it had been written a book about the evolution of cancer. He had read it in the article *The Mind of Disease* by Jonathan Weiner (1) published on November 12, 2010, as a review at launch, and for this reason he recommended me the book. A few days later, I received it as a great Christmas gift.

But who would ever make a new book on the history of cancer? There were dozens of publications on this topic, from simpletons to always unreadable blocks. This book of just fewer than six hundred pages, with elegant sepia cardboard cover tattooed with a brown crab, called *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*. Its author Siddhartha Mukherjee, clinical oncologist at Columbia University Medical Center and a graduate of Stanford, Oxford and Harvard, had dared to its title: A Biography of Cancer, to give personality to the disease, almost as if it were a thinking being, brutal, destructive, and he set out to write its biography. The approach of the disease from that point of view, it is unprecedented in the specialized literature, currently is a form as the patients come to the disease. Often we can hear them as they refer to the tumor as an invader with a life of its own, such as an unwanted tenant, something like a sort of alien, not far from the reality perception.

Reading this book was really a long and exciting journey. His scholarly writing lets us see an impressive dedication. But perhaps the most striking was the interest aroused in each issue raised. With 467 references, almost a reference by written page, the wealth from the documentary point of view is awesome. The days of Christmas 2010 passed between parties and the search for materials in the network or in the reprints of the boot file. The biography of one of the least understood diseases and that it has unfortunately accompanied the human race had become an obsession. It is an epic about the triumphs over the past five decades about the disease, but also a touching story of the defeats inflicted millions of people, their families and their treatment teams. Its pages, full of intelligent optimism, draw the commendable saga of people like Halsted, Pierre and Marie Curie, Farber, Bonadonna, Veronesi, De Vita and Bernard Fisher, among others. As a good storyteller, Mukherjee describes the emergence of radiotherapy, tobacco and wonderful drugs as the methotrexate, Platinum, tamoxifen and trastuzumab. But these compelling stories are contrasted with some unfortunate stories about fraud, falsification of statistical data, laboratory intrigues and disloyalties.

*The Emperor* was positioned in the big American bookstores and won, surprisingly, the Pulitzer Prize in 2011 becoming one of the most influential publications on cancer in recent years. A few months of the award, the book was even in newspaper stores.

This week, during the usual raids for review on the Internet, I found great news that renewed interest on the subject of this publication in USA. The PBS network has started filming the documentary *The Story of Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies* produced by Ken Burns and directed by the known documentarian Barak Goodman, winner of the Academy Award in 2000 with his tape *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*. In its trailer, which can be seen at the foot of this article, they promise us the launching, in three chapters, for the spring of 2015. (2)
Although much remains to be achieved, our generation is witnessing the best moment of the fight against cancer and everything seems to indicate that we will continue gaining ground. According to the recently published study CONCORD-2 in over twenty-five million patients in 67 countries, survival in various tumors has improved significantly in recent decades (3). But remain unavoidable differences between the developed countries and the middle and low-income countries that will have to attend. This film will be a new occasion to enjoy the magnificent work of Murkerjee, this time under the lens of Goodman, who, with his new work has the challenge of matching the unforgettable pages of this book. It is the chronicle of the organized effort by defeat the disease, the ships’s log of a crossing hard with many moments of wind in favor. A definitive book, is unforgivable not to recommend it. A tale that many wanted and needed to read and soon we can see on TV.

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References:

1) Weiner Jonathan. The Mind of Cancer
   http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/books/review/Weinert.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0