

Volunteers Against Cancer

By Walter S. Ross

IN the beginning was the word: and the word was cancer. In German *Krebs*; in French *le cancer*; in Italian *il cancro*; in Russian *rak*. And in every language, a word whispered, a word taboo. A word concealed: in news reports, the patient always died of "a lingering disease" or "a long illness". If you don't say the word, you will be held harmless from what it represents. This is superstition, rooted in fear. And cancer is perhaps the most feared disease of men. Nevertheless, properly used, fear can be a positive emotion, because, although fear of a nameless terror immobilizes, fear of an identifiable—and vulnerable—enemy can cause useful action, if there are positive, life-saving actions to take.

The concept that cancer might be controlled began to develop in the 1890's with the first useful surgical attack on internal cancer; and with the discovery of radium and the X-ray tube and their diagnostic and cancerocidal powers. Some doctors began to see that cancer need no longer be considered a totally "hopeless" disease. Instead, they began to attack both the fatalistic idea and to urge fellow doctors to do the same. As early as 1903, Winter, of Germany, wrote about educating women: "One must force them to instruct themselves on these subjects, and it is only possible through the newspapers. I have written an essay in the papers in which I explained everything that a woman ought to know about cancer of the womb, and in which I have warned her that her only chance lies in operation, should she become a victim of cancer."

The American Cancer Society owed its origin to ten physicians and five laymen who, in 1913, created the American Society for the Control of Cancer "primarily for the purpose of educating the public at large in the absolute necessity of treatment at the first indication of cancerous growth." That cancer might be controlled was a new and unaccepted notion in 1913. The Society's initial purpose was therefore to inform both doctors and the lay public. It found that doctors were sceptical of any dogma and insisted on proof before adapting new methods or new procedures. However, as both surgery and radiation improved it was demonstrated that early diagnosis and proper treatment could result in cure. At the same time, the Society began a modest effort to educate the public in the signs and symptoms of cancer and to the fact that it might be cured, as well as beginning efforts to bring the disease out into the open. The word "cancer" had, in North America in those days, roughly the same degree of social acceptance as the word "syphilis". People simply did not discuss such subjects, not even under the most intimate circumstances. Obituaries did not use the word "cancer" but some euphemism. The first major breakthrough was an

article by H. Adams in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1913 with the then shocking title: "What Can We Do About Cancer?"

Essentially, educating the doctor and changing his attitudes and educating the public and changing its attitudes were the goals of the American Society's sporadic and local efforts in several cities for the next thirty years. By 1937 they had become nationwide and, in 1945 the Society reorganized, changed its name to the American Cancer Society, Inc., (A.C.S.) and instituted a national cancer research programme. Since that time, research has become an important function—more than \$200,000,000 have been invested in various research projects by the Society up to 1968 and its educational efforts have greatly increased.

The Society's public education programme has always been based on the facts that "cancer is unique by (1) its immutable mortality if untreated; (2) the vital importance of *time* in treatment; and (3) its trivial early signs—indistinguishable from a host of relatively insignificant common complaints. While cancer is fatal if untreated, or if treated late, the fact is that early cancer is among the most curable of the major causes of death."

The backbone of the Society—its entire body, so to speak—is its volunteer army, more than 2,300,000 strong. They are physicians and scientists and dentists as well as bankers, businessmen, housewives and children.

Volunteers, 68,000 of them, provided the manpower to do a massive public health survey. One purpose of such studies is to identify high risk groups in the population. If such groups can be isolated, all the latest techniques of persuasion and detection can be brought to bear on these people to find and treat in the earliest possible stage any cancers that may develop.

Such surveys may identify factors in the environment which are related to cancers, or cause them. Some examples already discovered are the casual connection between over-exposure to sunlight of light-skinned people and skin cancer, the development of certain cancers by asbestos miners and workers in the aniline dye industry—both controlled by eliminating, or protecting workers from the offending substances.

The most important cause, cigarette smoking, is linked to lung cancer, as well as emphysema, heart disease, chronic bronchitis and other pathological conditions. It has now become accepted not only by the various medical societies in the United States, and the Surgeon General, but by most of the leading

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