Persistent Specter

The Dread Disease. Cancer and Modern American Culture. JAMES T. PATTERSON. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987. xvi, 380 pp., illus. $25.95.

Americans in the late-19th century had a terrible phobia about cancer. They worried that it might be hereditary or contagious; they thought of it as an alien invader, eating away at its victim; they described it as voracious, insidious, savage, and relentless, like the crab from which it took its name; and they knew it was a virtual sentence of death. Their fears have persisted almost without change for a hundred years. At the turn of the century, a physician described the disease as "a loathsome beast, which seized upon the breast, drove its long claws into the surrounding tissues, derived its sustenance by sucking out the juices of its victims, and never even relaxed its hold in death" (p. vii). Even after World War II, when science was clearing away some of the mystery and when heart disease was killing twice as many people, cancer remained *the* dread disease. As an expert explained in 1960, the nation had dealt successfully with the pale riders of pestilence and hunger, but "we must now face different riders, one in the shape of a mushroom cloud, and one in the shape of a crab" (p. 311).

In this superb study, based upon a wealth of contemporary accounts and archival resources, Patterson uses cancer and the phobia that surrounds it to examine patterns of thought and behavior during the past century of American life. He is not concerned with the scientific history of the disease; he writes sparingly about outstanding scientists and medical discoveries, and only about their hopes of conquest. Indeed, the overwhelming reality of the book is that "the mystery of cancer was infuriatingly to refute the more grandiose claims of modern medicine and to confirm the inevitability of human suffering" (p. 30). Its focus is on reactions to the disease. Cancer, more than any other malady, Patterson believes, mirrors a range of social concerns about illness, medical practices, death, and dying and reveals a long-standing cultural and ideological division about causation, therapy, and the role of government. His portrayal of this dramatic and enduring conflict between an "anti-cancer alliance," hawking new, scientific approaches, and a "cancer counterculture," adhering to traditional beliefs, constitutes the major portion of the book and makes for a compelling narrative.

Better than any scholar to date, Patterson describes the formation and perpetuation of the anti-cancer alliance, an elite composed primarily of the medical profession, scientists, and government officials, that has been able to dominate virtually all deliberations about the disease. The alliance began to form early in the 20th century when doctors, reflecting a revolutionary rise in their status, proclaimed themselves the cultural arbiters of the disease. They espoused the theory that local "irritations" cause cancer; proposed that early detection and surgery were its chief combatants; organized the American Society for the Control of Cancer (later the American Cancer Society) to educate the public; and predicted imminent breakthroughs. In 1938 the federal government, ever more responsive to the health needs of its people, established the National Cancer Institute; and after World War II research scientists, buoyed by such wonders as sulfa drugs, penicillin, and the atomic bomb, fostered hopes and promised a cure. Suddenly there was a crusade. Politicians and such civilian allies as Mary Lasker, eager to share in the victory, provided lavish sums for research; and President Nixon, certain that the government must play a larger role, officially declared a "War on Cancer." But the anti-cancer coalition failed to deliver a cure, and a stubborn cancer counterculture ignored their Message of Hope.

Patterson's portrayal of this amorphous group, for which he draws upon a unique National Cancer Institute collection of materials about popular attitudes regarding treatments and cures, provides the richest sections and the major contribution of his book. The counterculture was always a minority within American society, and although it occasionally reached into the middle class, it was made up primarily of the poor and ill-educated—the masses of recent immigrants, the blue collar workers, the impoverished families who rarely saw a physician, and the fundamentalist religious sects. These skeptics challenged orthodoxy's experts, their science and their exaggerated claims; sought out the purveyors of quick and inexpensive cures; and found solace in a vast array of folk remedies, patent medicines, faith healers, quacks, and charlatans. Their panaceas changed over time, from an early attachment to such remedies as cathartic pills, leeches, and the broth of a crayfish, to a 20th-century faith in diet cures, the Hoxide treatment, "orgone therapy," Krebiozen, and the *cause célèbre* of the 1960s, laetrile. Counterculture enthusiasts questioned the "irritation theory" with its associated gospel of early detection and rapid surgery and, responding to popular notions about diet and stress, gave their allegiance to careful living and self-help. They expressed an ambivalence toward modern industrial civilization with its laboratory science, secular thought, and paternalistic government, and, as late as the 1970s, their fears found an outlet in the environmentalist movement. By then, more and more middle-class Americans had come to appreciate the ditty "Everything, everything causes cancer, There's no cure, there's no answer, Everything causes cancer" and called for a greater commitment to prevention. Patterson is obviously more at home with the elite, but he takes the counterculture seriously; indeed, he devotes an entire chapter to the debate over cigarettes.

The book is sometimes repetitive, as the author traces the conflict through various chronological periods, and necessarily imprecise, which prompts the question whether the counterculture is as sizable in the real world as it appears in the documents. But it is continuously interesting and provocative and should appeal beyond an academic audience to health professionals and the general public.

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Arms Control in Space

Space and National Security. PAUL B. STARES. Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 1987. xx, 219 pp., illus. $28.95; paper, $10.95.

The debate over the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) has focused world attention on space-based weapons of the future. In danger of being upstaged by that debate, according to this book, is a much more immediate and no less important decision regarding the military use of space: whether the United States should proceed with deployment of antisatellite (ASAT) weapons. Whereas the operation of even rudimentary strategic defenses is at least a decade away, a U.S. antisatellite system is scheduled to become operational by 1990. Therefore, the antisatellite issue "deserves immediate attention before the United States commits itself to a new avenue of the arms race