

English Universities Press



The Nature of Cancer

P. M. Sutton

THE NATURE OF CANCER

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P. M. SUTTON

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THE NATURE OF CANCER

NEW SCIENCE SERIES

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

New Science Series

THE aim of the New Science Series is to provide authoritative accounts of topics chosen from the wide range of modern science. The series includes books by experts in the physical, biological and social sciences. In the selection of titles and in the treatment the needs of the reader who has a lively curiosity about the world around him, and is prepared to make a conscious effort to understand the thoughts and achievements of specialists, have been kept to the fore. Although special attention has been given to the younger generation, it is hoped that the series will also be of interest and value to more mature minds.

These books have been written to attract a wide audience. In an age in which life is increasingly affected by scientific discovery it seems essential that the practitioners should endeavour to make clear, in part if not in whole, the aims and implications of their work. It is hoped that the New Science Series will make a contribution to this end.

O.G.S.

PREFACE

I should like to thank all who have helped me in various ways with this book; especially my wife for her constant advice and assistance with the proof reading and indexing. I am very grateful to the editor of this series, Sir Graham Sutton, F.R.S. and to the publishers for their experienced aid and encouragement, and to my colleagues for advice on points of detail. I was fortunate that Mrs. Joan Ashford and Miss Margaret Grant typed the manuscript and prepared it for the publishers. My thanks are also due to Dr. Shields Warren and Messrs. Henry Kimpton for their kind permission to use figure 9.

P.M.S.

Welwyn Garden City

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TO
HELEN

INTRODUCTION

Medicine has seen many revolutions and abrupt changes in the course of its long history; and in common with the other major sciences progress has been especially rapid during the present century. But since the end of the last war, along with the discoveries in anaesthetics and antibiotics, another change has been taking place which is altering the practice of medicine today. This is the increasing education of the public and a more active participation by patients in their treatment. The two factors are related, since the more that people can understand about their illnesses the more definite will be their views about the best way in which they may be treated. This is an inevitable trend. Evidence of it is seen in the number of books and articles on medicine for the general reader published today, as well as in the amount of time devoted to medical topics on television. A public which knows about bacteria and viruses, hormones and operations will insist upon being told about the nature of the individual's disease, in terms that can be readily understood.

There is no doubt that whilst this is a desirable state of affairs it does make a doctor's problem more difficult. It is easier to diagnose and treat a patient if that person accepts the decisions without question, and to justify a particular course of action can be far from easy. The reason for this is that whilst most patients have some knowledge about health and disease, it is not often that this is enough to appreciate a full explanation. This can be the worst of both worlds, and an over-simplified and sometimes misleading picture of the illness may emerge. Since the clock cannot be put back, and nobody would want to reverse the processes of education, the only alternative is to explain as many of the facts as possible. It should be possible to build up a background of informed public opinion, against which good medical practice can flourish.

The problem is most acute with regard to cancer. This common disease causes more fear and worry than any other illness; indeed the unnecessary nervous distress directly due to worry about cancer is almost certainly greater than that produced by the disease itself. It is the theme of this little book that this should not

be so. Cancer is a serious disease—it would be misleading to pretend otherwise—but it is often completely curable, especially in its early stages. Even if it cannot be totally eradicated from the body there are now many ways available for holding its growth in check, thus enabling the patient to lead a normal life. It is not true that it is always, or even characteristically, a painful illness, as we shall see in some of the later chapters in this book. The tragedy of the cancer story is that so many patients delay seeking medical advice at a time when they could be completely cured; more than for any other disease, early treatment is the key to success. There is no doubt that this delay is caused by fear, based upon ignorance and half truths about the subject. This is not unique—it is only recently that child-birth has been rid of the cloak of superstition and plain nonsense which had covered it for so many generations; and the difference in attitude towards pregnancy and delivery is an obvious feature of modern medicine.

There are a great many unpleasant and dangerous aspects to living, but all of us do our best to avoid them. Nobody would fall into deep water and not struggle to get out, or not try to escape from a fire. The number of patients cured of cancer could be greatly increased by earlier diagnosis and treatment. There is also one other factor; medical progress is now so rapid that it is inevitable that sooner or later a complete solution to the cancer problem will be found. Probably this will be rather gradual, some forms of cancer being cured before others, as indeed has already taken place. Nobody knows when or where the next major discovery will be; but we may be certain that in the course of time it will come.