

## Film Cancer is...

Produced by the Mondofragilis Network, *Cancer is...* is a likeable mini-series focusing on the disease that kills 7 million people every year. The first episode—*Fighting Cancer*—premiered in Geneva last month. Three more episodes are to follow.

*Fighting Cancer* begins with some jaunty electronic music—imparting a rather pleasing 1980s feel to proceedings—followed by a few words from former US President George H W Bush, the series’ narrator. A voiceover from Peter Boyle, former director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer, points out that people can reduce their risk of developing cancer by 50% simply by making changes to their lifestyle. Bernard Levin from the MD Anderson Cancer Clinic in Texas, USA, follows; he recalls how at the start of his career oncology was regarded in the same terms as undertaking.

Boyle and Levin are the first of dozens of participants from over 30 countries; a dizzying array of experts, most of whom are oncologists, in a whistle-stop tour across the globe. It adds up to a documentary highly impressive in breadth, but lacking a little in depth.

Still, the show’s emphasis is refreshing. Cancer is addressed on a macroscopic level. There is a

cancer survivor interviewed here—a charming Canadian woman named Soleil—but the film’s focus remains solidly on national and international policy. Prevention, for example. Cancer documentaries tend not to be interested in preventative measures and causal relationships, not unless there’s something burning—cigarettes or a nuclear reactor, say. Far punchier to show bereaved families, scarred torsos, or shorn children. But prevention is key, argues the urbane John Seffrin (American Cancer Society) early in *Fighting Cancer*. He notes that all of mankind’s significant victories over disease have been won on the prevention front. Former Peruvian Minister of Health Luis Pinillos talks of establishing “preventatoriums”; clinics where people who show no signs of illness would have their risk of developing cancer assessed.

The director of Singapore’s National Cancer Centre, Khee Chee Soo, draws attention to the shift in the dietary habits of his compatriots: as Singapore’s post-war economy went from strength to strength, the country began to consume more and more red meat. Today, colorectal cancer makes up a fifth of male cancer mortality in Singapore. In parts of Africa, Martha Molete (Cancer Association of South Africa) explains,

spreading urbanisation has driven increasing consumption of fast food, away from the meal and vegetable-based diet that characterises rural areas. “People don’t know about food”, sighs Peruvian oncologist Raul Cordero. Other experts cite exercise, obesity, and tobacco consumption as factors implicated in the development of various cancers.

None of which is groundbreaking stuff, but it’s worth iterating, particularly in a documentary scheduled for screening all over the world. Our amiable interviewer—Giray, president of the Mondofragilis Group—quizzes Levin on different foods. Levin answers calmly: “Fine” and “fine, in moderation”. He’s asked whether he’d choose an organic banana over a non-organic one. He

For more information see <http://www.cancerfilm.tv/>



A children’s ward featured in *Cancer is...*





Discussing with Cordero the importance of diet

ponders for a moment, “I’d probably go for organic”, he says carefully.

It is this quiet circumspection that marks the participants of *Fighting Cancer*. Oncologists are a cautious people. “Things go slowly”, stresses Boyle. The experts express a uniform antipathy for headline-grabbing terms such as “breakthrough”. Aside from rare instances—discoveries about stem cells and gene mutations, for example—there are no breakthroughs. Cancer research is a process of “chipping away”, says one researcher. “The media isn’t realistic”, agrees another; they’re too focused on “cures”, contends Levin.

An area where the media could wield positive influence is in combating stigma. This remains a significant problem. “Addressing stigma is one of the most important things we can



Interview with Peter Boyle on the risk of developing cancer

do”, affirms Doug Ulman, of the Lance Armstrong Foundation. He describes the prejudice faced by many cancer patients as “shocking and alarming”. Myths continue to abound that cancer is contagious, or that those who fall ill are somehow at fault. It all serves to undermine efforts to encourage people to attend for treatment and testing.

Nevertheless, there is some cause for optimism: Spanish oncologist Jose Baselga reports that the stigmatisation of cancer patients remains in only a few pockets of the countryside. Meanwhile, Peru seems to have no such issues—cancer patients do not report difficulties in reintegrating into the workplace or local community.

The future for cancer research and treatment is less rosy. Baselga worries about a shortage of oncologists in Spain. His counterparts in Albania and Tanzania harbour similar concerns. Economic problems exacerbate

matters. Despite his illustrious career, Panillos earns less than US\$1000 per month from his activities in public medicine; without his private practice, he would not be able to make ends meet. Small wonder resource-poor countries have difficulties maintaining their workforce; Boyle cites the (possibly apocryphal) tale that there are more nurses from Malawi in Manchester than in Malawi.

*Fighting Cancer* has assembled a very agreeable set of interviewees—intelligent, unassuming, and knowledgeable—it’s a pleasure spending time with them. Readers of *The Lancet Oncology*, particularly those who attend, in varying degrees of willingness, the conferences that dot the calendar, will find few surprises, but for the layman this is a sprightly and engaging overview.

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## Books

### The Art and Politics of Science

**The Art and Politics of Science**  
Harold Varmus  
WW Norton, 2009, pp 256,  
£15.99 (US\$23.21, €17.64), ISBN  
978 0 393 06128 4  
Published March 26, 2009

Physicians and scientists usually retire quietly, without writing their memoirs. Their lives are typically as dull as dishwater and have little interest for others. Immortality is simply unachievable and has to

be accepted gracefully. This book is a different story. The author, Harold Varmus, discovered the first oncogene—and went on to uncover many of the molecular cogs that make cancer cells tick. His career

was distinguished by any standards: Nobel prize-winner, director of the largest biomedical research centre in the world at the National Institutes of Health, director of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and

science adviser to the President of the USA. Not a bad CV.

The book is a mix of personal reflections and crystal clear explanations on topics such as oncogenes, stem-cell biology, embryo research, the challenge of global health, and the creation of the Public Library of Science. It follows his career as a medical student, through medical residency, and into the research laboratory. Rather sadly, Varmus doesn't seem to have much empathy for patients—particularly evident in his student experience in psychiatry, which he dismisses as a field too difficult in which to make measurements. He didn't seem to have much fun as a resident either, leaving without completing his training. Instead he focuses in the research laboratory on subjects where good quality assays can be made to

work, produce publications in good journals, and fast forward careers.

Varmus was clearly very ambitious and driven from an early age. The book gives a great account of a dynamic career. But we learn nothing about the man—his strengths, weaknesses, loves, and dislikes. His family are barely mentioned, except in passing, and I know they were important to him. His many collaborators have been airbrushed out of his life. The omission of interpersonal details gives a very dry feel to the text. The next generation might not find Varmus' approach very inspiring in a world where work-life balance has assumed monumental importance. Having fun and earning money has become the holy grail of the modern professional.

As a young man, Varmus studied English at university. He was obviously impressed by C P Snow and sees himself

now in that sort of role. Unfortunately, eradicating poverty by globalising science is not easy, even with the contributions of the wealthy Gates Foundation. Allowing a privileged few to travel to safe, yet interesting places (first class) is unlikely to solve the logistic problem of diarrhoeal disease in children; still, sadly, the world's most common cause of death.

I recommend this short book for those entering a career in academic medicine. It illustrates the benefit of staying focused on one's goals. The message is clear: build an impressive CV before you diversify into curing the world's ills, poverty, and inequality. Then, at least, you can influence those who hold the power to do just that.

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## The Mercy Papers

Jackie Romm died in late 2004. She'd been ill with breast cancer for the previous 9 years. By the end, the tumour had grown so large that her nurse warned: "It's quite possible that the breast will split open". She expired after her oxygen tube was accidentally disconnected—"usually she would have screamed", her husband remarked. 9 years is a long time to hold onto a scream.

Daughter Robin had returned to Berkeley University after spending the summer at the family home. Suzanne—a partner at her mother's law firm—telephoned to say that Jackie's fingers had turned blue: "when the patient's fingers turn blue, Suzanne said, there are no more than four days left". This turned out to be an exaggeration: Jackie's fingers were neither blue, nor did she have 4 days left. But she was dying; "cancer was beginning its victory lap". Robin returned to Eugene, Oregon, USA—along with her dog Mercy—to spend a final few weeks with her mother. In the

midst of all this Robin began keeping a memoir. This has now been published by Scribner under the mystifying title *The Mercy Papers*.

Robin teaches creative writing at the College of Sante Fe in New Mexico. She's adept at describing small, sad moments. The urgency with which her family await the result of the presidential election, for example, and the trembling desperation with which they hope for a Democrat victory: "Something has to go right. We go to bed certain that the next day will bring good news. A new day, a new president. But in the morning, Kerry concedes the election". Jackie—by then fast approaching the end—is despondent: "who won? The words sound funny, like there is foam in her mouth... 'Bush won' I say. My mother says nothing. Then she shakes her head. For the rest of the day she doesn't move".

There are lighter moments, too, such as the clumsy rattle of Jackie's friends and family: "do you want some

soup?' my aunt asks. 'Do you want some soup, Jack?' Martha says, 'some wonton soup?' 'A milkshake?' 'Can we get you any food sweetie?' 'Some soup or a milkshake?' 'Sweetie? How're ya doing?' 'What about a milkshake?' 'Can we get you anything?' 'Sweetie?'"

Nonetheless, this is a problematic book. The "about the author" section notes that Robin "currently bounces between Berkley, California, and New Mexico", but if her memoir is anything to go by, she doesn't so much bounce as tumble. *The Mercy Papers* is in a phenomenal hurry. And, frustratingly, it never looks back. Hence we wonder about the claim that Jackie "helped disabled sports stars play in the big leagues"—is this a metaphor, or a statement of fact? But it is too late: Romm has already tumbled into her next thought.

Certainly, there is energy to the piece, but it is also messy and feverish—understandably so—and the author is in no mood to explain herself. For instance, she writes



**The Mercy Papers: A Memoir of Three Weeks**

Robin Romm  
Scribner, 2009, 213 pp  
£15-14 (US\$22-00, €16-71)  
ISBN 978-1-4165-6788-2

that her mother's death was "large, with many arms, and it changed the course of the world". Perhaps this is a reference to John Donne: "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind". Perhaps it is a philosophical statement: "the world is my idea", as Schopenhauer proclaimed. But we never find out. And, unexplained, the statement falls flat, rendered a cliché or hyperbole.

The author is prone to the occasional inelegant phrase—"normalise this tragedy"—and she can become repetitive. Moreover, the circumstances in which *The Mercy Papers* was written make it difficult to disentangle those ideas which are generated from Robin's angry, defiant grief from those which are genuine. For example, there's the assertion that lawyers are "obsessed with justice"—

which may have been true of Jackie, but is a little optimistic for the rest of the profession. At other times, Robin resentfully characterises her entire generation as breezily care-free—grief isolates, certainly, but such loss of perspective undermines *The Mercy Papers* and erodes its impact.

All of which is a pity, for there are plenty of promising glimmers here. There's the odd sparkling phrase—"death is available as tuna fish"—and an excellent description of Robin's screeching grandfather. *The Mercy Papers* is at its best when Romm resists the temptation to overwrite, when she refrains from metaphysical pondering and simply allows the events to speak for themselves.

After her mother died, Robin returned to college. She became a writer. This—the second of her books

to be published—was not originally intended for the public. But after the decision to release *The Mercy Papers* was made, there should have been a far more strenuous effort to prune and shape the memoir, including rewrites where necessary. Passing time could have established a crucial distance, without losing the truth and immediacy of the work.

Jackie Romm died a protracted, painful death. But she was surrounded by loved ones, a phalanx of palliatives eased her suffering, and she had lengthy passages of lucidity. In the face of an aggressive and implacable cancer, perhaps this is the best that can be hoped for. Small mercies, indeed.

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