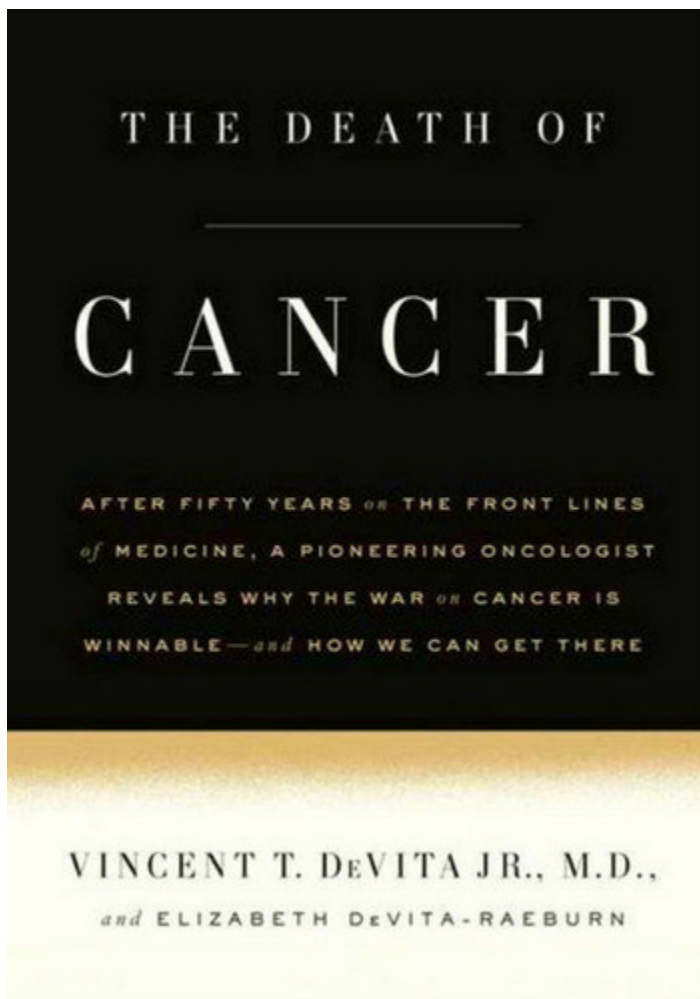


'Death of Cancer' is balanced

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"The Death of Cancer: After Fifty Years on the Front Lines of Medicine, a Pioneering Oncologist Reveals Why the War on Cancer Is Winnable – and How We Can Get There" by Vincent T. DeVita and Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn. New York: Sarah Crichton Books (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), 2015, 336 pages, \$28.



“On Dec. 23, 1971, in front of a throng of journalists, a jubilant President Richard M. Nixon signed the National Cancer Act, which launched the war on cancer – an unprecedented federal research effort,” Vincent T. DeVita and Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn explain near the beginning of “The Death of Cancer: After Fifty Years on the Front Lines of Medicine, a Pioneering Oncologist Reveals Why the War on Cancer Is Winnable – and How We Can Get There,” their treatise on how to solve the greatest medical mystery to confront the human race. “The legislation set aside \$100 million for the research, to be overseen by the director of the National Cancer Institute, who would be appointed by the president.”

“Today, more than 40 years have passed, and the country has spent more than \$100 billion on the war on cancer,” they write. “Where do we stand? What did we get for that huge investment? Many will tell you that we got little or nothing – that the war on cancer has been a failure, that people are still dying, and that you can’t solve a problem by throwing money at it.”

Like many readers, I have a personal connection to cancer. Both my parents died from the malicious and unforgiving malady. My mother surrendered to colon cancer in 2009 after a two-year battle with the disease. My father fought prostate cancer for 19 years after his initial diagnosis in 1996 before it took his life in May 2015. As anyone who has ever had to watch a loved one slowly succumb to this torturous and steadily progressive illness can attest, it can be a painful and drawn-out ordeal for everyone involved. One of the ways I deal with the unfortunate circumstances we all have to endure is by trying to find out as much as I can about what precipitated the situation. During the course of the past decade, I have read several books on cancer. The present volume is, without a doubt, the most reassuring I have encountered – without being unrealistically optimistic.

“Over the years, we’ve gained more tools for treating cancer, but the old ability to be flexible and adapt has disappeared,” the authors explain in “Outrageous Fortune,” the inaugural chapter. “Many

doctors now rely on what are known as standards of care – treatment guidelines issued by professional organizations or government institutions. The FDA uses them when considering drug approval, and insurance companies use them when deciding whether to reimburse patients for treatment. But this state of affairs also raises problems. Guidelines are backward looking. With cancer, things change too rapidly for doctors to be able to rely on yesterday’s guidelines for long. These guidelines need to be updated frequently, and they rarely are, because this takes time and money.”

DeVita is an oncologist whose credentials include former director of the National Cancer Institute as well as the National Cancer Program. He has a bachelor’s degree from the College of William and Mary and an M.D. from the George Washington University School of Medicine. His previous books include “Cancer: Principles & Practice of Oncology: Primer of the Molecular Biology of Cancer” with Theodore S. Lawrence and “AIDS: Etiology, Diagnosis, Treatment, and Prevention” with Steven A. Rosenberg. DeVita-Raeburn, the doctor’s daughter, is a journalist best known for “The Empty Room,” a memoir about the death of her older brother who had a rare immune disorder. The recipient of a master’s degree in public health from Columbia University, her articles have appeared in The Washington Post, Self, Glamour, Health, Psychology Today and Harper’s Bazaar.

One of the key features I liked about “The Death of Cancer” is the way the authors intersperse the technical story of how cancer therapy has advanced in the past few decades with relatively brief case studies of how the ailment has affected the lives of its victims. The decision-making process associated with selecting the most appropriate course of treatment often occurs under duress. The father and daughter editorial team go to some lengths to explain how this invariably affects the efficacy of the care received by patients. The terminology in the book can be somewhat challenging in a few places, although the narrative is generally accessible to a wide audience. The intent of the effort was obviously to make cancer research intelligible to those without an extensive background in the science on which it is based. Overall, the book is exceptionally well-researched and even includes a 16-page picture gallery that allows the reader to get a better sense of who the scientists and physicians profiled are as human beings.

In the final analysis, it was the authors’ irrefutable conviction that cancer can be controlled and managed – if not cured outright – on a much larger scale than is presently the case that I found comforting and even encouraging. DeVita has been matching wits with cancer for decades and is fully aware of the obstacles still standing in the way of a true cure. And while what we hope is reality does not always turn out to actually be reality, if he sees hope on the horizon, then maybe there is legitimate reason to be a little more sanguine about our prospects.

“As optimistic as I am, I don’t think there will ever be a world in which cancer doesn’t occur,” DeVita concedes in “The Death of Cancer,” the 10th chapter and one I found reassuring in an oddly reflective sort of way. “It’s in our biology. In the millions of cell divisions that take place in our bodies every day, there are too many opportunities for mistakes. And some of those mistakes will activate a cancer hallmark and give rise to cancer. I do, however, think we’re heading for a time when we’ll be able to cure almost all cancers. And those that we can’t cure as readily will be converted to chronic, manageable diseases. Immortality is not our goal here, just a normal life, free from the gnawing worry that a premature death is lurking just around the corner. We can worry about immortality after we cure cancer.”

I recommend this one for anybody who wants a balanced assessment of where we stand in the war Nixon declared some 45 years ago. It doesn’t disappoint.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.