



Understanding Breast Cancer (Colloquium Series on the Cell Biology of Medicine)

Joel D. Pardee

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The mysterious disease of cancer, including breast cancer, has plagued mankind since the dawn of recorded history. Regarding the elusive cause of the disease, the "Father of Medicine," Hippocrates of Athens (460–377 BC), wrote that, "For instability is characteristic of the humours and so they may be easily altered by nature and by chance." The enigma has persisted until today. In 1971, then President Richard Nixon signed the National Cancer Act and declared a "War on Cancer." He believed the counsel of scientists and physicians that if sufficient resources were committed to the fight, cancer could be virtually eliminated within 5 years. The prophesy failed. Although mortality from a few cancers, most notably leukemias, has been significantly reduced, carcinomas, cancers of the epithelium, which account for 80% of cancer deaths, remain unchanged. While tremendous advances have taken place in our understanding of the molecular and cellular mechanisms operant in cancer, it has proven exceedingly difficult to prevent the occurrence or to halt the progress of the disease. The very best therapy remains early detection while the primary tumor is small and localized to a single site, followed by removal of the offending growth by surgery and/or radiation. The great challenge of finding a cure confronts us yet, and it is effective intervention at the molecular level that offers our best hope. We still must find the "magic bullet."

Table of Contents: The Problem of Cancer / How Carcinomas Become Lethal / Breast Cancer / Breast Cancer and Estrogen / Treating Breast Cancer / Conclusion / References

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