

Book Review

This is a Review of the Book “Therapeutic Revolution the History of Medical Oncology from Days to the Creation of the Subspecialty”

Edited by Pierre r. Band

When I completed my medical education and received my MD degree in 1949, I had learned nothing about the treatment of metastatic cancer. We did know about the biology, the pathology and the clinical course of cancer, but the question of treatment was restricted entirely to surgery and radiation i.e. local control of local disease. Once cancers had spread systemically, it was judged to be terminal and no instruction in how to manage patients with systemic cancer was made available to me. Of course, there were early beginnings following the observations on the pathology of soldiers who were exposed to mustard gas during the First World War in 1917, there were a series of drugs based on nitrogen mustard, so-called alkylating agents that could induce temporary regressions in lymphoid malignancies and a few other malignancies. However, the field of chemotherapy really began when Doctor Farber at Children's Hospital in Boston described the first complete remissions in childhood acute lymphoblastic leukemia induced by aminopterin, which we now realize is a folic acid antagonist. Subsequently in the early 50s, the anti-tumor effect of 6-mercaptopurine was described by Hitchings and Elion and the anti-tumor activity of adrenocortical steroids was described. However, these remissions were short-lived and to a large degree were not widely practiced, and from a scientific point of view were largely ignored. So the scientific evaluation of the treatment of systemic, that is, metastatic or widespread cancer, is a story that Dr. Band describes in this very readable and entertaining book.

Dr. Band was himself a physician involved in the earliest days of the development of the science of the treatment of systemic cancer and he had the opportunity to work directly and be instructed by several of the pioneers by Dr. James Holland, Dr. George Mathe and others. Dr. Band has put together a history of development of the specialty of medical

oncology based on his own experiences as a physician scientist working in this important new field and he has taken the time to physically meet and interview and photograph many of the pioneers in the development of this subspecialty. As a result he has created a book which is authentic because he was in the midst of all of these developments and accurate because he has taken the time to not only review publications but to interview many of the pioneers in this field.

Dr. Band has created a valuable addition to the history of medicine by describing accurately and completely many of the events that led to the development of medical oncology as a subspecialty of internal medicine. The author's credentials are impeccable because he was in the midst of these developments during his professional career and he has spent the time and the energy to personally contact many of the players in this emerging new field. This book clearly makes an important contribution to the history of cancer treatment.

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