

A very short history of cancer research funding

In his book *The Emperor of All Maladies*, Siddhartha Mukherjee tells the story of one of the turning points in the history of cancer medicine. A turning point that he dates to May 1947.

At this time, cancer was a fatal disease and as a subject of discussion it was rarely mentioned among close friends, least of all at polite social gatherings. Cancer was an ugly disease that appeared to harvest lives regardless of the individual's background, lifestyle or social stature. Its victims were carved up in radical surgical procedures or subjected to experimental chemical trials with little or no understanding of the underlying mechanisms. After a brief period of remission, most patients succumbed to new tumors, some far more aggressive than their predecessors. Research was performed by a handful of dedicated doctors who were nameless, faceless and relegated to the basements of hospitals to perform research with dubious outcomes.

If cancer was ever to have a future as a disease to be tackled seriously, it needed serious funding. Cancer had to become a disease that people were not afraid to talk about in public. And the focus had to be on a patient that nobody could deny deserved all the help in the world.

The story begins 19 years earlier, with a
baby in a basket...

The baby girl was abandoned on a seat in the Sheridan Square Film Theater in Pittsburgh at the start of the Great Depression of 1928. The note attached to the baby read:

“Please take care of my baby. Her name is Catherine. I can no longer take care of her. I have eight others. My husband is out of work. She was born on Thanksgiving Day. I have always heard of the goodness of show business and I pray to God that you will look after her. Signed, a heartbroken mother.”

The baby was named Catherine Variety Sheridan, her surname after the theater where she was found, and her middle name after the Variety Club, an association of actors, producers, directors, writers and film theater owners that adopted Catherine as their ward.

The media exposure from the adoption of baby Catherine was far greater than the members of the Variety Club could ever have dreamed. During the war years, the entertainment industry had boomed and Hollywood realized that they had earned the adoring, if somewhat fickle, goodwill of the general public. The Variety Club redefined itself as a philanthropic organization that was keen to reinforce the idea of ‘the goodness of show business’.

Every dime counts

The Variety Club was inspired by the March of Dimes, a campaign initiated by the actor Eddie Cantor when Franklin D Roosevelt was re-elected President. In 1936, Roosevelt, himself a polio victim, established the National Foundation of Infantile Paralysis. Polio research and patient care received a massive boost in funding thanks to the nationwide campaigning efforts of the March of Dimes, which reached out through the radio waves into the living rooms of private homes across America. Dimes in envelopes flooded into the White House from factory workers, housewives, schoolchildren and Girl Scouts. In the first year alone, 2,680,000 dimes were collected. By the late 1940s, John Enders had succeeded in cultivating the first live poliovirus in the lab. The development of the polio vaccine was a direct result of the public funding initiative. In 1938, FDR focused on cancer, and signed legislation that gave birth to the National Cancer Institute. Its initial budget was \$400,000.

Bill Koster of the Variety Club of New England began the search for a new cause that his club could own. He had visited many hospital labs and found medical scientists buried under piles of papers, but none of them had the ambition to think big. Until he met Dr Sidney Farber.

Farber was at Children’s Hospital Boston working on childhood leukemia, a disease that had confounded the medical community – no treatment had been identified that extended the

survival of patients. Farber had been experimenting with a new drug, an antifolate called aminopterin. Farber had demonstrated the first signs of partial remission of pediatric leukemia by aminopterin in a four year old girl. Empowered by a rare positive result, Farber was now obsessed by his vision of a hospital dedicated to the research of childhood leukemia.

Koster had found his man. Together, Koster and Farber began to hatch plans to make the hospital a reality. In 1948, they launched the Children’s Cancer Research Fund. Their first raffle raised an impressive \$45,456, but hardly enough to open a hospital. Koster recalled the success of the Catherine Sheridan campaign and convinced Farber that they needed a poster child, a mascot for childhood leukemia.

Jimmy gives cancer a voice

The challenge was fraught by a seemingly intractable problem. Most of the children were extremely weak; far too weak to appear on radio or make public appearances. Most children died within months of their diagnosis. Finding a patient for the public to root for was not going to be easy. Scouring through all the patient lists, Koster and Farber landed on Einar Gustafson. Einar was not suffering from leukemia, rather he was being treated for a rare intestinal lymphoma. He was young, fresh faced and radiated hope. Einar was the boy that the public would want to save from cancer.

Einar was renamed 'Jimmy' and, in 1948, the Jimmy Fund was born. Using smart PR moves, like recruiting the Boston Braves to sing the team's song with Jimmy on the radio, the Jimmy Fund attracted thousands of donors, many of whom queued in the lobby of the Children's Hospital to personally hand in their donations so that Jimmy could watch the Braves on TV. The Jimmy Fund far surpassed its original target of \$20,000, raising \$231,000 in its first year. Since its foundation, the Jimmy Fund has raised \$750 million for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute using the tried and trusted method of fundraising through public engagement.

Going to the country

Farber learned that the fight against cancer was not just about science – it was as much about being seen and heard. He needed to understand the intricacies of political lobbying. He needed a clear strategy and a reason for people to believe in his cause. Gaining and sustaining the public's attention required the persuasive art of advertising. Enter Mary and Albert Lasker.

Mary Lasker was a star saleswoman, a long-time lobbyist and a political campaigner. A survivor of pneumonia and the Spanish flu of 1918, she became the most influential health activist of her day. Mary was horrified by the ravages of mastectomy operations, so she focused her keen mind on cancer. Mary's husband

Albert Lasker was an advertising executive at the firm Lord and Thomas, inventors of classic ads for Lucky Strike and Sunkist. He famously said: "If a toothpaste... deserved advertising at the rate of two or three or four million dollars a year, then research against diseases... deserved hundreds of millions of dollars".

The self-styled group of 'Laskerites' included action-oriented businessmen, movie producers and lawyers. They ousted the presiding scientific board of the American Society for the Control of Cancer (ASCC) and renamed the organization the American Cancer Society – the ACS. Their first move was to gain nationwide public awareness by publishing articles about cancer screening and detection in Reader's Digest. Over the following years, the results of their massive campaigns were clearly evident. Donations rocketed from \$832,000 in 1944 to over \$12 million in 1947.

Farber's coalition and friendship with Mary and Albert Lasker would transform the funding of cancer research. Farber had the scientific credentials needed to sway Congress, and the Laskers stood for constant lobbying 'on the Hill' and extremely effective advertising. Most significantly, Mary Lasker's work ultimately led to President Nixon famously declaring War on Cancer with the signing of the National Cancer Act of 1971. With the lobbying of the government, and with the urgency to

cure cancer firmly in the public eye, millions of federal dollars have poured into cancer research, so that the US today enjoys a dominant position and is a magnet for talent in cancer research.

Further reading

The Emperor of All Maladies - A Biography of Cancer. Siddhartha Mukherjee. ISBN 978-0-00-725092-9.

The Sheridan Square Theater on Cinema Treasures
www.cinematreasures.org/theaters/16551

The Jimmy Fund
www.jimmyfund.org

The Dana-Farber Cancer Institute
www.dana-farber.org

The Lasker Foundation
www.laskerfoundation.org