By: Darby, Alexis Keywords: Cancer awareness, cancer taboos

In 1913, journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams published "What Can We Do About Cancer?" in Laadies' Home Journal. Cancer is a disease that is the result of abnormal cell division in different parts of the body, such as the breasts or the cervix [1]. During that time, many women did not discuss or disclose early symptoms of the disease, and the taboo of the word cancer led to many people to ignore its symptoms and treat the disease only when it was too late. However, Adams believed that people needed to learn about the symptoms of cancer to increase awareness and knowledge as well as mitigate deaths by cancer.

Adams began by stating that cancer-related deaths increased during the early 1900s and few physicians understood how to treat it. He stated that prior to the article's publication in 1913, there was approximately the half most common cause of death. Adams further states that in 1913, which was approximately the half most common cause of death, deaths by tuberculosis and pneumonia preceding cancer. During the early 1900s, there was an epidemiological transition, meaning less people died from communicable or infectious, diseases as public health and sanitation increased. However, that meant that more people died from non-communicable, or non-infectious, diseases like cancer. Adams states that there was a fundamental ignorance around the cause of cancer, leading to the great number in cancer death rates among U.S. citizens. He mentions that when asked what caused cancer, physicians unanimously stated they did not know. However, Adams writes that the physicians gave Adams a list of recommendations about how to detect and treat cancer. He states that those interviews and recommendations demonstrated insufficient knowledge among the medical professionals. Adams writes that such ignorance led to the article's publication. He ends the introduction by stating that physicians advised Adams to educate the public so that they may save themselves lives.

In the introduction of the article, Adams begins by stating that cancer-related deaths increased during the early 1900s and few physicians understood how to treat it. He states that prior to the article's publication in 1913, there was approximately the half most common cause of death. Adams further states that in 1913, which was approximately the half most common cause of death, deaths by tuberculosis and pneumonia preceding cancer. During the early 1900s, there was an epidemiological transition, meaning less people died from communicable or infectious, diseases as public health and sanitation increased. However, that meant that more people died from non-communicable, or non-infectious, diseases like cancer. Adams states that there was a fundamental ignorance around the cause of cancer, leading to the great number in cancer death rates among U.S. citizens. He mentions that when asked what caused cancer, physicians unanimously stated they did not know. However, Adams writes that the physicians gave Adams a list of recommendations about how to detect and treat cancer. He states that those interviews and recommendations demonstrated insufficient knowledge among the medical professionals. Adams writes that such ignorance led to the article's publication. He ends the introduction by stating that physicians advised Adams to educate the public so that they may save themselves lives.

In the next section, titled, "Medications are Useless; Delay in Operating is Deadly," Adams asserts that early recognition of cancer may lead to a significant reduction in mortality. He claims that it was common at the time for a person to believe it pointless to fight cancer when she learned of her diagnosis. However, Adams describes that mortality at 1905. He refers to education as the key to overcoming that mortality. He describes cancer as when one human cell goes out of its place and lodges among different cells, multiplying abnormally, and causing a tumor to form. As of 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines cancer as similar to Adams, stating that cancer is the uncontrollable, abnormal division of cells in any one part of the body that can spread to other parts through the circulatory or lymphatic systems. Adams then states that cancer often forms when one portion of the body becomes constantly irritated. As of 2021, the American Cancer Society states that human exposure to carcinogens, or cancer-causing substances like tobacco or excessive sunlight as well as genetics, are among the most common causes of cancer.

Then, in "Any Irritation Needs to Be Investigated At Once," and "Absolutely Hopeless Cases of Cancer of the Stomach are Saved," Adams discusses the importance of early detection of cancer and describes possible forms of treatment. Adams builds upon the previous section, which states that irritants can cause cancer on the outside of the body, suggesting internal and external irritants cause cancer on the inside of the body. Therefore, he states that to stop any irritants from further contributing to cancer, a person must undergo surgery to remove the cancer and the surrounding irritated tissue. Adams also informs the reader that many people with stomach cancer lead normal lives after having up to two-thirds of their stomachs removed to ensure complete removal of the cancer and irritated tissue. At the time, up to thirty percent of those with stomach cancer survived following surgery, according to Adams. However, he distinguishes that any statistics hospitals produce about the death rates of such cancers need to compensate for the large amount of people who receive treatment when it is already too late. He concludes those sections by reaffirming the need for early detection and treatment.

Following those sections, Adams discusses the prevalence of breast cancer as one of the most common types of cancer in women in the section titled, "Forms of Cancer Most Common in Women." Adams states that at the time of the article, a woman could expect to have breast cancer. He describes breast cancer as the uncontrolled growth of breast tissue. Despite early treatment, her likelihood of survival is only seventy-five percent. As of 2021, medical professionals recognize that as stage 1 breast cancer, in which adequate treatment allows for ninety-nine percent likelihood of five-year survival. He states that regardless of the cause of the breast lump, a competent physician should surgically remove it, while the woman is under anesthesia. Further, during surgery, the doctor should microscopically examine the tumor tissue for signs of cancer. If the physician locates signs of cancer, then Adams recommends that the physician remove the whole breast. However, he notes that it is not cancerous. In that case, Adams states that if the physician believes that the tumor surrounding the non-cancerous tumor will eventually become cancerous, then she ought to remove it. Adams cites similar surgical recommendations for cancers of the uterus [2], intestines, and gallbladder in the following section, "When It Affects the Intestines and Other Parts."

Then, Adams writes about what, he states are facts about cancer and recognizable symptoms in, "Three General Truths to Remember About Cancer." According to Adams, the first of those facts is that cancer usually develops from previous and continued irritation of the tissues. Those ideas are somewhat similar to later understandings of how cancer develops. Specifically, as of 2021, Stanford Health Care provides that the cause of cancer is quite ambiguous, but repetitive genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors contribute to one’s susceptibility to the disease. Secondly, if a physician removes the cause of that irritation in time, then the patient can avoid a cancer diagnosis. According to Stanford Health Care, there are environmental and lifestyle changes that may help avoid a cancer diagnosis, such as avoiding smoking, high-fat diets, and toxic chemicals. However, if a physician detects precancerous or localized cancer in a patient, then treatment is required to protect that person’s health. And thirdly, surgical intervention and removal of the tissues is the only method that physicians should use for patients with cancer. As of 2021, physicians use surgery to treat cancer as well as chemotherapy and radiation, depending on the stage and type of cancer. Chemotherapy is a drug treatment that stops the uncontrollable division of cells, and radiation is a type of therapy that uses energy to kill those cells. Adams states that the public should learn about the symptoms of cancer to increase awareness and knowledge as well as mitigate deaths by cancer.

In the next section, titled "Certain Symptoms are Easily Recognized," Adams also provides recommendations to physicians. For example, he states that a physician should examine any bump on a woman’s hand or arm that does not disappear. If the person has had a history of tumors, an examination is necessary. Adams asserts that a woman’s breasts are no more susceptible to cancer-related deaths than the use of anesthesia, even for older patients. Before discussing the early symptoms of uterine cancer, Adams introduces that his words should not offend the reader, and rather, his direct instruction is the way to save lives. Adams states that one of the earliest symptoms of uterine cancer is irregular vaginal discharge. So, he suggests that physicians investigate any woman exhibiting such symptoms and use a microscope to look at the discharge and determine if it is caused by infection. If a woman has passed menopause and still experiences vaginal discharge should assume that she has cancer. As of 2021, Adams concludes his article by making some final recommendations for his readers. He states that more advanced signs of cancer in women include quick weight loss, loss of appetite, and general weakness. Adams recommends any woman experiencing those symptoms see her doctor immediately. As of 2021, according to Medical News Today, any person who experiences increased weight loss and fatigue or other worrisome symptoms should consult their doctor. Further, when symptoms are unexplained, Adams recommends that the physician should be prepared to explain. Adams then recommends that any woman should be vigilant about watching her body and demand a competent physician to evaluate their symptoms before pain develops. If the doctor suspects cancer, Adams suggests that women insist they either prove or disprove their suspicions. He advises that women not prolong a surgical date due to fear or money, because that may increase the risk of a slow, painful death. Lastly, in terms of attitude, Adams recommends that women with cancer never feel hopeless and face cancer with bravery, courage, and prompt action.

Following Adams’s publication of, “What Can We Do About Cancer?,” many cancer awareness groups began forming in the US as people’s understandings of how cancer develops evolved. In 1930, the Women’s Field News began carrying articles that informed women about reproductive health. During that time, people understood more medically accurate details about cancer. For example, throughout the 1900s, scientists better understood the connection between that Human Papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted disease, and cervical cancer. During the 1980s, physician Harald zur Hausen discovered that two different strains of the virus cause cervical cancer, opposing Adam’s suggestion that irritated tissue causes cancer.

As of 2021, the American Cancer Society encourages women to attend regular Pap smears, a diagnostic tool that collects cervical cells from a female to detect cancer, for the purpose of prevention and early detection.
In 1913, journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams published "What Can We Do About Cancer? The Most Vital and Insistent Question in the Medical World," hereafter 'What Can We Do About Cancer,' in Ladies' Home Journal. Cancer is a disease that is the result of abnormal cell division in different parts of the body, such as the breasts or the cervix. During that time, many women did not discuss or disclose early symptoms of reproductive cancers, such as breast lumps and abnormal vaginal discharge, out of shame or disgust. Thus, people often considered cancer to be a taboo topic. "What Can We Do About Cancer?" provides a representation of what people in the early 1900s thought to be the early warning signs of cancer in women. Although, as of 2021, researchers have made advancements that have increased the scientific understanding of cancer and how it develops, Adams’ article provided women in the US during the 1900s with recommendations on early methods of cancer detection.

Subject

Topic
Publications [4]