"What Can We Do About Cancer? The Most Vital and Insistent Question in the Medical World" (1913), by Samuel Hopkins Adams[1]

By: Darby, Alexey Keywords: Cancer awareness, cancer taboo

In 1913, journalist Samuel 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," Ladles’ 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[2]. During that time, many women did not discuss or disclose early symptoms of cancer, such as breast lumps or abnormal vaginal discharge, for fear of being stigmatized or ostracized by friends and family. As many people feared a cancer diagnosis, according to author Ellen Leopold. According to researchers Ann Bode and Zigang Dong, "What Can We Do About Cancer" was one of the first popular articles for women published about the warning signs for cancer, such as breast or ovarian cancers. At the time, public and scientific communities treated the information in "What Can We Do About Cancer" as accurate.

Adams organized the two-page spread, "What Can We Do About Cancer," into ten sections with separate subheadings. Adams begins with an introduction, in which he outlines that he interviewed many US physicians who considered to lack knowledge about cancer, according to the article’s publication. On the first page, Adams wrote subsections, "Medicines are Useless; Delay in Operating is Deadly," and "Any Irritation Needs to be Investigated at Once," and "Absolutely Hopeless Cases of Cancer of the Stomach are Saved," in which he outlines the need for individual vigilance in cancer detection and how to treat it once the cancer is detected. The remaining six sections appear on the second page of the two-page spread. There, Adams included subsections, "Forms of Cancer Most Common in Women," and "When It Affects the Intestines and Other Parts," in which he discusses different types of cancer, primarily breast cancer, and provides recommendations for detection and treatment. Then, Adams writes about what others ought to know about cancer and recognizable symptoms, in "Three General Truths to Remember About Cancer." In the next section, titled "Certain Symptoms are Easily Recognized," Adams also provides recommendations to physicians about when and how to detect, what he refers to as, signs of cancer. Lastly, also on the second page, Adams wrote subsections, "Stomach Cases Present the Most Baffling Problems," and "The Risk is Not in Surgery, but in Delayed Surgery," in which he discusses a patient’s risk of death due to cancer.

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 prevent it. He states that prior to the article’s publication in 1913, there was approximately the third most common cause of death. Adams further states that in 1913, the rebate had given too place cancer as high as the third most common cause of death, deaths by tuberculosis and pneumonia preceding cancer. 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 1936, the doctor. Further, Adams tells his readers to be wary of persistent sores and irritation, whether internal or external. Adams then recommends that women should be vigilant without undue worry and demand a competent physician to evaluate their symptoms before pain develops. If the doctor suspects cancer, Adams suggests that women insist either prove or disprove their suspicions. He advises that women should 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 1936, the Women’s Field Service[3] campaigned nationwide, reminding more about the risks of breast cancer and breast exam. 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[4], a sexually transmitted disease, and cervical cancer. During the 1980s, physician Harald zur Hausen[5] discovered that two different strains of the virus cause cervical cancer, opposing Adams’s suggestion that irritated tissue causes cancer.

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Sources

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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. "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**

- Cervix uteri--Cancer
- Breast--Cancer--Patients--Care
- Breast--Cancer--Patients--Counseling
- Breast--Cancer--Surgery
- Adams, Samuel Hopkins, 1871-1958
- Ladies' home journal
- Collier's
- American Society for the Control of Cancer
- Women's Field Army
- Neoplasms
- Cancer
- Tumors
- Maligancy
- Benign Neoplasms
- Breast--Cancer--Patients--Care
- Breast--Cancer--Patients--Counseling
- Breast--Cancer--Surgery
- Adams, Samuel Hopkins, 1871-1958

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.