

Behind the veil

John Cairns

The Cancer Industry: Unraveling the Politics. By Ralph W. Moss. *Paragon House*: 1990. Pp. 502. \$21.95.

TEN years ago, Ralph Moss wrote a savage denouncement of the treatment of cancer patients and the way the "war against cancer" was being organized. The book was called *The Cancer Syndrome*, and it contained hardly a good word for any of the established forms of treatment or for any of the major figures in the field. The only people to escape condemnation were the proponents of those drugs such as laetrile which, rightly or wrongly, had been judged to be ineffective and were not licensed by the US Food and Drug Administration.

Moss is now offering the same attack, bringing it up to date by the inclusion of more details about the costs of treatment. This is a worthwhile addition. Moss produces some powerful numbers: even in the early 1970s, the average medical costs incurred by cancer patients in New York greatly exceeded the total annual income of the average New York family. (As one in three of the population eventually gets cancer, this means that most families were, at some time, having to devote a year's income to pay for the treatment of cancer — an extraordinary state of affairs, when one realizes that this payment was producing hardly any change in the age-standardized death rate from cancer.)

Since the 1970s, the bill has increased. Last year, it was probably more than \$50 thousand million. As Moss says, "cancer care is not a charity; it is a business — big business", and he reminds us that "someone is receiving much of the money that the cancer victim disburses". The average doctor in the United States would probably say that this is as good a thing to spend your money on as anything else and that, anyway, much of the money is being siphoned off by the lawyers. I myself believe that families (and nations) should put education of the young at the top of the list and high-tech treatment for the old almost at the bottom (especially if it does not work), and I suspect that this is most people's opinion. For example, Surgeon-General Koop was quoted as saying, at the time of his retirement, that he had "brought a generation of Americans to realize that the promotion of good health and the prevention of disease is largely within their grasp, and that by changing lifestyles they can accomplish more than by worrying about high-tech medicines." I wish that Moss had extended this section of his book and considered what he believes we should be spending our money on.

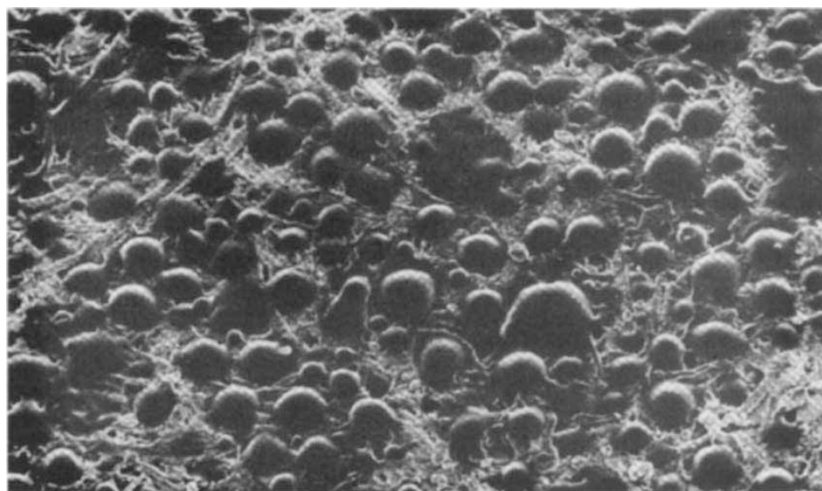
When Moss discusses different forms of treatment for cancer, his relentless negativity clouds his judgement. He is sarcastic on the subject of five-year survival rates, mainly because he does not really understand competing risks and the problem of determining who is cured and who is not. He has many bad things to say about surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. Although some of his criticisms are surely justified, I think he is too gloomy. Who knows, one day he himself may develop cancer of the prostate and be only too thankful for the palliative action of diethylstilbestrol (something he does not mention in his book, even though this is a well-established treatment for a common form of cancer). The subject of mammography provides a good example of Moss's propensity to look on the worst side of things. It is now abundantly clear that screening by mammography can reduce subsequent mortality from breast cancer; this was shown in a New York trial and in the subsequent experience of the Scandinavian countries (which, conveniently for everyone else, differed greatly in their rates of screening). Certainly, there have been arguments as to whether the whole exercise is cost-effective and whether the benefits are likely to outweigh the risks, but these are separate, subsidiary issues. Typically, Moss elaborates the risks but does not at any point mention any of the

evidence of benefit.

It was not obvious from *The Cancer Syndrome* why Moss should be so angry. In his new book, he has put into the preface an important piece of personal history. He describes how, in the late 1970s, he was fired from his job as assistant director of public affairs at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center because he thought that their trials of laetrile had been rigged to give a negative result. This explains the theme in most of the chapters, which is that there is probably some wondrous cure for cancer out there that is being suppressed by the chemical industry and the cancer establishment. I can see the attraction in believing that somewhere in the world around us there lurks the answer to our every need — a love potion, a recipe for transmuting base metals into gold, even an instant cure for cancer. But the evidence is not good. After all, if something like laetrile really worked (in the sense that penicillin worked, when first tested) it is hardly conceivable that the many people who have been given laetrile would keep silent about their miraculous cure.

Despite its obvious defects, the book contains many good things, and I wish it could be made required reading for those who are high up in the US cancer establishment, because it would give them at least an inkling of the public's mounting displeasure. As the contractors for the Department of Defense are coming to realize, you cannot hope to continue indefinitely to be paid huge sums of money for weapons that do not work. □

John Cairns is in the Department of Cancer Biology at the Harvard School of Public Health, 665 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, USA.



Each of these tiny resin spheres is filled with glue and has been incorporated into the surface of a sheet of paper. When the sheet is pressed onto a firm surface, it becomes stuck as some of the spheres burst, releasing their adhesive. The process can be repeated many times as only a few spheres burst on each occasion. This micrograph of a 'Post It' sticker is reproduced from the new paperback edition of *Under the Microscope: A Hidden World Revealed* by J. Burgess, M. Marten and R. Taylor. Published by Cambridge University Press, on 12 July, £12.95, \$19.95.