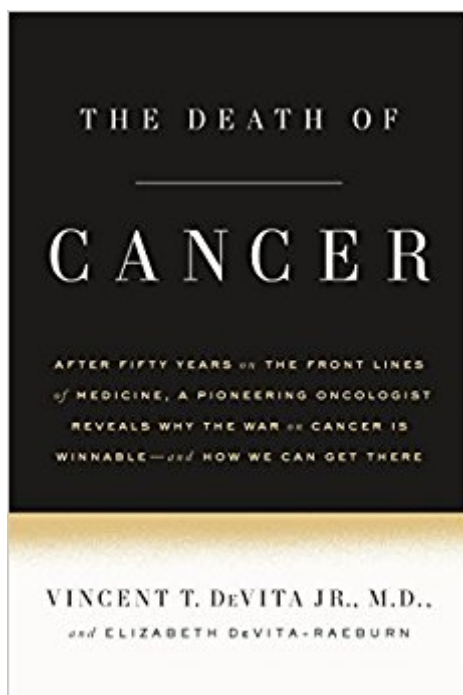


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# The Death Of Cancer: After Fifty Years On The Front Lines Of Medicine, A Pioneering Oncologist Reveals Why The War On Cancer Is Winnable--and How We Can Get There



## Synopsis

The true story of the war on cancer from one of its generals. Cancer touches everybody's life in one way or another. But most of us know very little about how the disease works, why we treat it the way we do, and the personalities whose dedication got us where we are today. For fifty years, Dr. Vincent T. DeVita Jr. has been one of those key players: He has held just about every major position in the field, and he developed the first successful chemotherapy treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma. As one of oncology's leading figures, DeVita knows what cancer looks like from the lab bench and the bedside. *The Death of Cancer* is his illuminating and deeply personal look at the science and the history of one of the world's most formidable diseases. In his hands, even the most complex medical concepts are comprehensible. Cowritten with his daughter, the science writer Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn, *The Death of Cancer* is also a personal tale about the false starts and major breakthroughs, the strong-willed oncologists who clashed with conservative administrators (and one another), and the courageous patients whose willingness to test cutting-edge research helped those oncologists find potential treatments. With historical depth and authenticity, DeVita reveals the true story of the fight against cancer. *The Death of Cancer* is an ambitious, vital book about a life-and-death subject that touches us all.

## Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Sarah Crichton Books; Reprint edition (November 1, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374536481

ISBN-13: 978-0374536480

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 23.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 123 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #173,505 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #65 in [Books > Textbooks >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

“This riveting, beautifully written, and poignant memoir takes us on an enormous journey—from cancer’s past to its future. Vincent T. DeVita Jr. brings us behind the scenes to the invention of

breakthrough therapies for some forms of cancer in the 1960s and 1970s. He also provides a much-needed manifesto for the future.

• SIDDHARTHA MUKHERJEE, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Emperor of All Maladies* "The Death of Cancer is an astonishingly good read. Written by a cancer expert who happens to be a cancer survivor as well, it deftly explains the treatments that have turned this insidious disease from a death sentence into a manageable chronic condition for millions of people and what yet remains to be done. I devoured the book in two sittings, struck, page after page, by its insight, honesty, compassion, and plain common sense."

• DAVID M. OSHINSKY, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Polio: An American Story* "The Death of Cancer is a fascinating insider history of the long battle against one of the world's most feared diseases, told with both insight and frustration, and ultimately with hope. This collaboration between the former National Cancer Institute director Vincent T. DeVita Jr. and his talented science writer daughter, Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn, results in a wonderfully human portrait of the scientists who join the fight and a wonderfully smart look at the ways we might actually win it."

• DEBORAH BLUM, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Poisoner's Handbook* "Superb science writing . . . One of the most absorbing and empowering science histories to hit the shelves in recent years."

• Kirkus Reviews (starred review) "DeVita blends crisp writing and a gift for explaining complicated scientific concepts clearly with deep knowledge, passion, and wit. The book is by turns entertaining and maddening, but always fascinating. Highly recommended"

• Library Journal (starred review) "DeVita, an oncologist and professor at Yale School of Medicine, collaborates with his daughter DeVita-Raeburn on this engaging, informative, and inspiring history of DeVita's prominent role in developing innovative cancer treatments . . . They also unveil some startling insights [and] offer salient advice . . . This remarkable memoir doesn't just urge the public to have hope: it showcases the exciting evidence that we may finally be winning the war on cancer."

• Publishers Weekly (starred review) "[A] straight-talking, optimistic memoir."

• Booklist

Vincent T. DeVita Jr., M.D., is a professor of medicine, epidemiology, and public health at the Yale School of Medicine. He was the director of the National Cancer Institute and the National Cancer Program from 1980 to 1988, when he joined Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center as the physician in chief. In 1993 he became the director of the Yale Cancer Center. At the NCI, he developed a cure for Hodgkin's lymphoma with combination chemotherapy, proving that advanced cancers can be cured by drugs. He is a former president of the American Cancer Society and the coeditor of *Cancer: Principles & Practice of Oncology*, a textbook of cancer medicine. Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn has written about medicine, science, and psychology for many

publications. She is the author of *The Empty Room: Understanding Sibling Loss*. She lives in New York City with her husband, the writer Paul Raeburn, and their two sons.

I haven't met Dr. DeVita but have known of his great contributions and leadership in the field of cancer for decades. For example, the textbook he has co-edited is the major resource of the field, and is now in its 10th edition. No less, he served as the Director of the NCI for 8 years and Physician-in-Chief at Sloan Kettering. Moreover, he discovered the definitive therapy for Hodgkin's disease, which has certainly stood the test of time. Accordingly, there could hardly be a more qualified individual to write about the inside story of cancer. One of the most impressive books that I've ever read is Sid Mukherjee's *Emperor of All Maladies*, which tells the story of cancer in a very different, historical and masterful way. So did we need another book that tracks cancer treatment's progress over the past 5 decades? YES, because in this book, DeVita, with his daughter Elizabeth, an accomplished science author, give a no-holds-barred account of the field with many points that are critical and resonate. Here are just a few: 1. That the practice of cancer care is not keeping up with the knowledge base and discoveries 2. That finding an outstanding oncologist (and team) for a particular cancer is extremely difficult and not just simply resolved by going to a leading institution 3. That the FDA, academic center IRBs, insurers, and practice guidelines are all holding back the progress in the field compared to the steep learning and progress that was possible when all these restrictions were not in place I think the book is exceptionally well done and it is particularly refreshing to see a leading academician unplugged, telling the truth---even when it relates to the institutions he worked at or the people he interacted with. Woven in this valuable memoir are DeVita's personal accounts of his own advanced prostate cancer and the loss of his son at a young age due to aplastic anemia. No doubt Elizabeth DeVita Raeburn's contribution helped take the storytelling quality to another level. My only critique point is that there is not one mention of the high cost of cancer drugs, and how are we going to deal with this vital problem. DeVita has many thoughtful and cogent recommendations for how new drugs should be studied and approved, and how the FDA has overstepped its bounds by regulating the practice of cancer care. And he has insight from the biotech side having served on ImClone's Board of Directors. I would have liked to see his ideas on the >\$100,000 price of every new FDA approved cancer drug. But that omission doesn't detract from a superb book that I highly recommend. Not only would medical students and physicians benefit from reading it, but people with a diagnosis of cancer (and their family members) will get inside perspective about seeking the best possible care and outcomes. If I had cancer, I'd want to contact DeVita for

guidance.

DeVita's book, *The Death of Cancer*, is a personal recollection of one of the most well-known cancer specialists in the world. In a sense it is an Odyssey tale of a highly competent and prolific person who flows with his times and manages the Scylla and Charybdis of Government work. The book is well written and reflective of the man and his times. DeVita started out during the Vietnam era when any male graduating from Med School found themselves, unless otherwise excused, ready for immediate assignment to some military unit. Many of the top students were fortunate to get to go to NIH which was DeVita's fate, and it was this flow of talent in the late 60s which made NIH and NCI one of the best institutions in the world. Thus the tale of DeVita and cancer starts here with NCI and a flow of excellent talent. DeVita describes his work on the use of multiple chemotherapy regimens and the resistance from the likes of Farber in Boston, hardly an uncommon occurrence especially in Medicine. This was the MOPP therapy that most now know as a major breakthrough in Hodgkin's. The discussion on how he and the team managed to persist and managed to go through the then significant administrative and bureaucratic complexities is amazing. The discussion on his involvement in the "War on Cancer" and the political games is quite interesting especially for anyone who has not spent a tour of duty in Washington. There were games within games and DeVita was at times a willing participant but as seen in the book and excellent observer. His description of the political gamesmanship is worth the read if nothing else. It is also worth the while for anyone seeking to grasp how Washington functions, and why it may work at times and often falls into total disarray. On p. 159 I was interested to see the interlocutory between Benno Schmidt and Jim Watson while Watson was I gather performing one of his classic poses. This also is worth the read. I have had my students return from a talk by Watson and ask me: "Does he really think Physicians and Engineers are useless?" But I gather that is Watson, a scientist at heart. On p 219 there is a great discussion of his time at MSKCC, a world renowned institution but at times falling behind in certain areas. DeVita states: "MSKCC had the potential to be the best cancer center in the world, it wasn't" is a powerful statement and at times quite true. MSKCC has powerful backers and Board members and although it may try from time to time to be at the lead there is always the chance that it becomes insular. The lesson DeVita brings out here should be a warning for many such institutions. On p 247 DeVita discusses the recent Hanahan and Weinberg paper on Cancer, a follow on to what the two authors had written in 2000. This is a paper on the hallmarks of cancer and is looked upon as a sine qua non in the literature. DeVita lauds it at length and rightly so. Yet

what this paper also shows is that we have learned a great deal but the "War on Cancer" is just getting harder the more we learn. One could argue that the recent Hanahan and Weinberg paper albeit prescient and insightful lacks the depth on epigenetic factors which we are seeing more and more in cancers. The more that is learned the more complex the disease. On p 253 DeVita discusses the inflammation relationship. We often ask what causes cancer and the more we understand inflammation the more we can see the nexus. This is a useful and important discussion as well. On p 258 DeVita makes an interesting statement: "In my opinion, when there is less than a 10% chance of the cancer recurring after a patient passes his or her cancer's critical period, then the patient should be told, in all likelihood, he or she is cured." This is a powerful statement and one a physician with extensive clinical experience is wont to utter. However one should parse the statement. First, how does one determine a 10% chance? In prostate cancer we can perform a prostatectomy and monitor PPSA for several years and then see a met occur. When did the 10% level occur? Second, what is a critical period? How do we define it for each cancer? Then the catch phrase of "in all likelihood" is something the patient may or most likely not hear. Cancer patients often has selective hearing. Overall the book is highly enlightening and a must read for anyone interested in the progression of cancer therapy. Also DeVita's discussion of his battles with the FDA and Sen. Kennedy's blatant interference with NCI if it in his opinion interfered with the FDA was quite interesting. DeVita bares the political quagmires of Washington and demonstrates that progress can often be made despite the Government overhead by dedicated and highly competent individuals.

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