

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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Cancer can't be ignored

By Karen van den Blink

Seizing health issues as one of the focal points of the now-infamous Presidential debates before last November's election, then-President George Bush proudly declared to then-Governor Bill Clinton that AIDS research receives more government funding than cancer research. As a sexually transmitted disease, AIDS is spreading like an uncontrollable cancer and undoubtedly deserves the immediate attention of the government, if not the American public. But cancer, like AIDS, tells a similar story of pervasiveness that is perhaps not so well known.

Because of my familial losses to cancer, I took it upon myself to find out what the disease is doing to the American public. Brace yourself because here's what I found: The 1992 statistics released by the American Cancer Society (ACS) and collected by the the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results (SEER) program state that 83 million Americans living today will eventually have cancer. That figure translates into one in three Americans! In essence, one in three Americans will be struck by a disease they can neither control nor fully avoid. In contrast, AIDS is a predominately sexually transmitted disease, (excluding the hundreds of people who contract the HIV virus through blood transfusions, intravenous drug use, or the fatal exchanging of blood.) AIDS is an avoidable atrocity: Thousands of lives can be saved by taking the necessary precautions involved in safe sex. Furthermore, AIDS education grows more common and helpful as the disease is further researched. Cancer, in contrast, lingers

in the minds of many fearful people whose grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, or friends have lost their lives fighting against a dark disease that has few answers.

The questions may linger, but the chilling figures and stirring statistics explode. In 1992, approximately 1,130,000 people were diagnosed with cancer, and in 1993, roughly 1,400 people a day will die of the disease. This means that of every five deaths in America, one will be due to cancer. While these figures are alarmingly high, they do not include skin cancer, whose claims are skyscraper-high. In fact, over 600,000 cases of skin cancer are reported yearly; the most serious form is melanoma, with an estimated toll of 6,700 people last year.

The subtopic of skin cancer aside, the threat remains that grave dangers of cancer exist in all realms of the body and do not target a particular group of people. Cancer claims no prejudice. As the most vulnerable part of society, children between the ages of 1 and 14 fall into the fatal clutches of cancer more than any other disease. And contrary to popular belief, leukemia is a predominately adult disease, striking nearly 10 times as many adults as children. Furthermore, lung cancer claims the lives of a staggering number of men and women, with an estimated 146,000 deaths in 1992 alone.

As women's health issues reach the forefront, a direct message to women reads: Since 1987 lung cancer, not breast cancer, has been the leading cause of cancer death for

women. According to SEER, in 1992 there were an estimated 180,000 new cases of breast cancer, and scientists estimate that one in nine women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime. Coincidentally, lung cancer incidence rates have declined steadily for men from a high of 86.6 per 100,000 in 1984 to 81.5 in 1988, whereas the incidence rate of women continues to increase steadily, to a high of 39.8 per 100,000 in 1988.

Cancer mortality rates in the U.S. have been increasing steadily in the last half century, according to ACS reports. Echoing this finding, a recent cover page excerpt from *USA Today* stated, "Adults today may be at higher risk for cancer than their grandparents were. In the current *Lancet*, Swedish researchers say that people born during the 1950s have a higher risk of getting the disease than those who were born from 1873 to 1882." The reason given: a higher incidence of carcinogens in the air than in the past. This article is one of many that focuses on the subtle power of cancer. Another article I chanced upon while reading *The New York Times* highlighted the re-issue of a best-selling autobiography by former NBC correspondent Betty Rollins, who wrote of her struggle with breast cancer.

Perhaps you are wondering what relevance this information has to our lives. The statistics speak for themselves, but the awareness lies within this generation. Living in New York City, we cannot help but be aware of our ailing environment and the endless issues surrounding us daily. Cancer seems an endless issue. But I believe differently. We at Columbia can take action and try to make a difference about health issues with the same passion we have for the many other issues swirling around campus.

Last month while visiting the University of Pennsylvania, I could not help but notice a barrage of signs announcing a benefit ball for cancer research. I felt embarrassed when I admitted to my friend who attends Penn that as a university, Columbia claims no such fame. But we can. Let's organize a Columbia benefit ball next year to raise money for the American Cancer Society. Seizing health issues as one of our focal points, I believe we at Columbia can make a footprint in the sands of time.

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