



Cancer
Society

The History of Cancer



c80 million years ago

Fossilised dinosaur bones from this period show possible evidence of cancerous cells.

c3000 BC

Evidence of cancer found in Egyptian mummies from this period.

c1600 BC

Egyptian papyruses describe treatments for cancer including cutting out with a knife or red hot irons. Stomach cancer was treated with boiled barley mixed with dates, and cancer of the uterus by a concoction of fresh dates mixed with pigs brains introduced into the vagina.

c400 BC

Evidence of cancer found in mummies of pre-Colombian Incas of Peru.

c300 BC

Hippocrates, the Greek “Father of Medicine”, named a range of tumours, lumps and bumps as carcinos and carcinoma. It was thought cancerous tumours had roots spreading out like the legs of a crab. Cancer was thought to be caused by too much black bile in the body.

c50 AD

Like the Greeks, the Romans found that some tumours could be removed by surgery and cauterised, but no medicine seemed effective. They found that surgery sometimes aggravated the spread of cancer, or that some tumours grew again.

c500-1500 AD

Little advance was made in understanding cancer. It was still believed to be caused by excessive black bile. Surgery and cautery were used on superficial tumours. Caustic pastes, usually containing arsenic, were used for the palliative control of more extensive cancers. Phlebotomy (blood-letting), diet, herbal medicines, powder of crab and other symbolic charms were used.

c1500 AD

Practice of autopsy became more widespread and a greater understanding of internal cancers began to develop.

c1650 AD

Advances in medical technology assisted the study of cancer. The invention of microscopes and discoveries in blood circulation, cells and the lymphatic system were major steps forward.

c1750 AD

Causes for some cancers were suggested, such as snuff related to cancer in the nose; soot related to scrotal cancer in chimney sweeps.

c1840-1900 AD

Landmark discoveries in anaesthetics and antiseptics improved surgical methods.

1895 – X-rays discovered.

1898 – radium isolated.

c1900 AD

Recognition of hundreds of carcinogenic materials, both manmade and natural. Improvements in diagnosis and pathology techniques. Huge advances in physiology, biochemistry and molecular biology.

c1900-1950 AD

Radiotherapy developed as a treatment.

c1945 AD

Chemotherapy came later as a treatment.