

The Truth in Small Doses

Why We're
Losing the War on Cancer
—and How to Win It

Clifton Leaf

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In a provocative, eye-opening, and ultimately inspiring history of the war on cancer, a celebrated expert asks why we are losing the battle and how to find victory.

A provocative, eye-opening history of the war on cancer, *The Truth in Small Doses* asks why we are losing this essential fight and charts a path forward.

OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, deaths from heart disease, stroke, and so many other killers have fallen dramatically. But cancer continues to kill with abandon. In 2013, despite a four-decade “war” against the disease that has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, more than 1.6 million Americans will be diagnosed with cancer and nearly six hundred thousand will die from it.

A decade ago, Clifton Leaf, a celebrated journalist and a cancer survivor himself, began to investigate why we had made such limited progress fighting this terrifying disease. The result is a gripping narrative that reveals why the public’s immense investment in research has been badly misspent, why scientists seldom collaborate and share their data, why new drugs are so expensive yet routinely fail, and why our best hope for progress—brilliant young scientists—are now abandoning the search for a cure. *The Truth in Small Doses* is that rare tale that will both outrage readers and inspire conversation and change.

The Truth in Small Doses: Why We're Losing the War on Cancer-and How to Win It Details

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From Reader Review The Truth in Small Doses: Why We're Losing the War on Cancer-and How to Win It for online ebook

Traa says

I am always dubious of books that have the word "TRUTH" in large letters on the cover (a tactic employed by people with strong opinions that may or may not be based in reality), but by the end of this book the author had convinced me that the "War on Cancer" needs some serious reform. Be warned, this is not a light read. In order to support his thesis, Leaf first endeavors to convince the reader that progress on this front is minimal at best and regressive at worst. There were times that I felt that his bleak opinion of the current state of cancer research may have been a little overblown, but at the same time he provides a powerful argument that we cannot begin to reduce the cancer burden until we improve upon the current system. The "and How to Win It" portion of the title also comes "in small doses", so don't go in hoping this book has all the answers. It has many more questions than answers, but most importantly, it has a call to arms.

I received my copy of this book for free through the Goodreads First Reads program.

Anup Sinha says

Outstanding book by Clifton Leaf on what is a most profound issue. Leaf is not a doctor or a researcher, nor does he have any scientific background that I can determine but that just makes it more impressive. In fact, he takes the angle of a very intelligent person (financial writer by trade) who has been touched by cancer himself and is looking at a dysfunctional system from outside. He is willing to make observations that people in the field would be scared to, or perhaps, too blinded. There's no question that the tremendous financial investment into a cure for cancer is yielding very little result. Leaf doesn't have all the answers, but he sure has some good ideas on what went wrong and what we can do to fix it. This is much too important an issue to ignore and I hope it gets traction. He has an excellent writing style and the narrative should be at least readable for non-science people.

John Kerastas says

This is an important book about an important topic: "Why we're losing the war on cancer – and how to win it."

I give the book five stars for explaining "why we're losing the war on cancer."

The statistics Leaf provides to back up his assertion that we're "losing the war" are absolutely compelling. If you read nothing else, read Chapter I – "Counting" which spells out very clearly that we are not winning the war on cancer.

As I read this section it seemed to me that we're getting the least bang for the buck that we're investing in this war. It feels like we have a system that dilutes the "war on cancer" into numerous skirmishes that are not helping win the war or even a strategically important battle or two. The reason, in his opinion, is a "dysfunctional cancer culture."

Leaf writes that he was driven to write this book because “If the efforts to win the fight against cancer were paralyzed by a dysfunctional cancer culture, how did we get here? Those five words – ‘How did we get here’ – became the focus of my life for the next nine years. They are, indeed, the core of this book.” In reading that I clearly got the sense that he not only has “skin in the game,” most of his body and waking thoughts are in the game, too.

The book has four sections:

Part I describes the enormity of the cancer burden – a burden that is rarely understood and horrifying when it is.

Part II “shows why the scientific strategy we have chosen cannot succeed in lessening the terrifying human cost of cancer.”

Part III examines the “dysfunctional cancer culture” in copious detail. Commonly found words in this section are “fiefdoms” and “lack of collaboration/synergy.”

Part IV provides some “tough love” medicine for healing this broken and dysfunctional system.

As a guest editor for the New York Times Op-Ed pages and a previous executive editor at both the Wall Street Journal’s SmartMoney magazine and Fortune magazine, Leaf is a good writer. He takes complex science and process issues and writes these issues about them in the simplest way possible.

Sometimes, though, “the simplest way possible” made me wish I’d remembered everything I should have learned in high school biology.

To counteract the density of the science, Leaf often illustrates his point with a very human tale about how some doctor or scientist made a significant impact in the war against cancer. I particularly liked the story about the Irish, one-eyed surgeon Denis Burkett and his 10,000 journey to “help solve the mystery of the African lymphoma.”

Who should read this book?

I hope that everybody involved in cancer research reads this book.

I wish that folks who control cancer research grants are required to read this book.

I want my doctors to read this.

And I yearn for every government officials involved with the “war on cancer” to read this.

Should cancer victims, caretakers and friends/family read this book? Maybe. This isn’t “Gone Girl” or “The Inferno” or “And the Mountains Echoed.” Leaf packs tons of important context into his stories and science into his explanations. As a result I had to reread several sections and probably still don’t understand the bits regarding anything happening at the cellular level.

I do hope that Mr. Leaf comes to the Chicagoland area because I’d love to listen to him talk about his book and the “dysfunctional cancer culture.”

*I received the book for free but didn’t receive any inducement to write a favorable review. If folks want me to review their books in the future, though, please keep in mind that I really like hazelnut gelato.

Jonah says

This book contains great points about reforms necessary in healthcare but contains numerous glaring flaws.

First of all, the objection to how cancer death rates are reported can only be evaluated if we did an age by age comparison- which he doesn't provide. His numbers in no way reject the hypothesis that we are reducing the cancer death rate for all age groups.

Secondly, he falls far short of showing that we need to be less cautious about treating pre-cancer; his claims that pharmaceuticals are responsible for drops in heart disease and liver disease are not borne out (unless the pharmaceuticals in question are vaccinations for hep B).

Although he claims that cancer research money misallocation is responsible for lost research, the evidence of previous researchers who wouldn't be funded today is mostly researchers who weren't funded when they did their research either... so misallocation doesn't even matter. Further, many of the history he reports on didn't happen that way. Insulin wasn't "discovered" as a new thing by Banting- using pancreatic extract was an old tack that was tried by Banting largely as a way of trying an old and unexciting thing again for grant money and alcohol in a prohibition era town. And the "clinical trial" that showed lemons and oranges treated scurvy effectively made no scientific splash and was even, to a large extent, RECANED.

Also, a lot of rise in cancer in the first half of the 20th century is anything but mysterious- it's the cigarettes, stupid. At some points, half of cancer deaths have been attributable to smoking- an issue barely touched on.

Anyway. I appreciate the perspective, and the look at how our money is (mis)spent, but I really thought the book could've been done better.

Billy says

A powerful indictment of our cancer industry that has made marginal progress at great expense in fighting this disease(s). From a broken grant-funding process, to an over-abundance of caution on the part of drug companies, to a failure to focus on prevention and "preemption" of disease. A severely flawed clinical trial process that selects for drugs that are often no better than existing treatments, lack of standards that make comparing data almost impossible, inability of researchers to acquire tissue samples, funding going to a select group of researchers and institutions who play it safe and don't look for innovative solutions (which wouldn't be funded), and researchers spending half their time applying for grants are some of the issues covered. Solutions proposed include better management of the overall enterprise, funding people, not projects, focusing on prevention, which has worked in heart disease, stroke and infectious disease.

Seth Kanor says

I read an early review copy of this meticulously reported, elegantly written book and was blown away. It is hard to believe that a book of this scientific rigor and depth could also be such a gripping narrative. If you are a reader of public health, of science, or if you have been affected in any way by cancer, or if you are simply a fan of masterful non-fiction, this book is not to be missed. Given the enormity of the subject matter,

it is an astonishing accomplishment.

K. Lincoln says

I'll start out by saying that I'm reading this from the perspective of a breast cancer survivor near the one year anniversary of my diagnosis.

I've been reading all the books I can about cancer, including Emperor of All Maladies, The Cancer Chronicles, and HER2: The Making of Herceptin.

This is a fine addition, although uncomfortable in its criticism of the "War on Cancer" to the conversation, written in very readable style (I'm a lit major and all my cancer knowledge is self-researched).

Lots of information in this book resonated with information from the other books. The criticisms here about the nature of the FDA requirements for bringing drugs to human trials, the difficulty of getting specimens or people to join the trials, the unfocused and traditionalist nature of research despite reams of money being thrown at the problem resonated very much with the unbelievable story in HER2 of how Herceptin was developed in the first place, as well as the somewhat negative view of The Cancer Chronicles that we have yet to scratch the surface of all complex mystery of how and why different cancers arise.

Once I was diagnosed with breast cancer, my mind immediately started trying to think of "why." Sadly, there is no way to tell-- we don't know enough. But what this book DOES point out is that up until now the medical establishment has focused on ways to prolong life once diagnosed, contrasted with widespread diseases such as diabetes and heart disease where the focus has been on prevention. "the central aim of the cancer war is to keep patients with cancer alive longer-- that mandate can never be sacrificed.....if we do nothing to reduce the number of new cancers...we will find ourselves deeper in this war of attrition, with each new year bringing a growing number of patients to the front lines."

And that is one of the disquieting and uncomfortable things to read. If you take Leaf's statistics as true, the new number of cancers each year is growing. And there is no real "cure" for breast cancer. There are varying hit or miss therapies that put you at risk for later cancers, but as a woman diagnosed at age 41 with a stage II carcinoma, I can't help feeling that a focus on prevention would be better than the chemo, radiation, and endocrine therapy I have to undergo with no real surety the cancer won't come back.

To this end, the concept of "chemoprevention" as a process (There is no "you have cancer or you don't have cancer") is one of the most important ones in the book, I think.

Also disquieting is Leaf's assessment of the government grant funding process coupled with the rather moribund and traditionalist avenues of research. Leaf calls for a funding process that would allow scientists to not only test hypothesis, but to ask questions, the kind of questions that lead to discoveries like HER2 or Gleevec. Leaf also laments the USA's lack of a central tissue-sharing network and lack of central direction.

At the end Leaf spends rather a long time discussing how a scientist (Burkitt) "discovered" a childhood virus-caused cancer in Africa to prove his point of the usefulness of just asking question. This detour into Burkitt's discovery was interesting, but felt a bit meandering to me.

Reading the book made me a bit discouraged about the state of medical research, but it also made me more

determined than ever to support clinical trials as well as continue my own research into how diet and exercise can help me do all I can to keep cancer from becoming a problem again in my own life.

Nick Varchaver says

Leaf's writing is luminous, his reporting deep and profound, his thinking completely original. This book will completely change how you think about our battle against cancer—but it's simultaneously a riveting read, with every sentence a pearl.

A Malcoski says

A must-read and hopefully, a game changer in how cancer is fought in this country. An entertaining book filled with wonderful stories of how we came to fight the war on cancer and lost the battle in the process. Filled with easy to digest science and facts, Truth is also a scary eye-opener to the flawed culture surrounding the cancer fight. The same universities are awarded grants. Outside-the-box thinking is frowned upon. Hungry med students eager to make a change are met with the uninspired truth that makes up the system. This book is a call to arms and one, that I hope, opens up the discussion that will lead to change.

William Nist says

The "War on Cancer" fizzled from its beginning in 1971. That is the premise of Leaf's book on Cancer and why we have such little progress even today as other areas in Medicine are advancing rapidly (say, Cardiology). The number of cases keeps mounting, and if it were not for earlier detection, the incidence of cancer would also be growing.

This book is a diagnosis of what went wrong and what can be done about it. The dysfunction appears to be in the poor management of the "war" and the growth of a cancer research system that actually resembles the growth of cancer in the body...rapid and aimless. The mushrooming system of grant, grant applications, grant evaluations, the narrow target-drug strategy, etc, literally sucks the resources from the actual scientific effort! The 'publish or perish' mentality, the endless clinical trial process, the lack of standardization of nomenclature and tissue collection...all of these contribute to the dysfunction.

So, the system needs a pretty radical change. Leaf lists "7" changes that need to happen now. They all address the issues listed above, but his most salient point is that this war needs some professional management, some command and control, some engineering mentality.

I enjoyed this read almost as much as I was troubled by it. After all, now that I am 65, the diagnosis of Cancer is probably just around the corner. I would like to think someone is taking the cancer war seriously.

Matt Heimer says

You wouldn't think that a book of this nature would make ideal vacation reading, but I picked up my copy

while on a cruise ship, and found myself almost unable to put it down for three days. Cliff Leaf (who's a friend and former colleague of mine) finds a remarkable narrative balance: He includes just enough hard science (and there's plenty) to give a not-especially-knowledgeable reader an introduction to the workings of cancer research and the grim bio-mechanics of cancer itself. But at the same time, he includes enough anecdotal and historical color to keep the book from bogging down in dry details. And it's all knit together by a passionate urgency of tone that reflects Leaf's own experience as a cancer survivor.

I think there's a lot of room for debate about the details Leaf's short prescription for "How to Win" the war on cancer, but by the time he offers that prescription at the end of the book, even the most skeptical reader will have to concede that it's founded in responsible, dedicated and immersive research.

Sheila Read says

If I win this book I plan on donating it to the local cancer center.

Brandi says

Clifton Leaf's "The Truth in Small Doses: How We're Losing the War on Cancer - and How to Win It" deals with a topic that has touched many people's lives, including mine (my father passed away from cancer). Mr. Leaf discusses how funds have been misspent in cancer research, how the nation's most promising young scientists pursue work in other areas, how scientists are reluctant to share information and collaborate enough, and how pharmaceuticals are expensive yet usually ineffective. He points out that many in the 'cancer culture' are more interested in publishing than achieving breakthroughs.

Unfortunately, members of my family witnessed that first hand. My father had been diagnosed with a rare cancer that most in his medical team did not have any experience with. Some on this team seemed more interested in 'studying' him than treating him.

Hopefully works like Mr. Leaf's raises awareness of many of the problems surrounding the current war on cancer and inspires change. I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the subject. This book was won from the Goodreads.com website in exchange for a review.

Rebecca says

If you're in the "Cancer Community" you'll find a completely different take on the disease and its challenges in "The Truth in Small Doses". Have you heard we're winning the war on Cancer? Sorry, but no. The death rate really hasn't changed since 1971 because, for all the success with treatment, the number of cancer cases keeps rising.

Using math and demographic data, Leaf makes a good case that we should shift the focus from treatment, which in many cases isn't that effective, to preventing cancer. Finding cancer early saves lives. \$200,000/month treatments really don't, at least from a statistical standpoint.

While I recognize the politics of this disease can be overwhelming, if America wants to get the best payoff for its healthcare dollar, we need to rethink this battle.

Angie Hahn says

Learned a lot about the pharmaceutical industry and medical research. Was published in 2014 and there have been many changes in the last couple years, so some things are already out-dated.
