

“Diagnosis: Lung Cancer? The Surgeon Operates”

Newsweek

June 22, 1959

“Cancer of the Lung--Case No. 248301,” by Calvin Tomkins

This five-page cover story includes a graphic description of an open-chest operation in a patient suspected of having lung cancer. The article begins,

“Fifty years ago, cancer of the lung was virtually unknown. Today, it kills more than 35,000 Americans a year, strikes down hundreds of thousands throughout the world, and is increasing at a rate that some doctors call ‘epidemic.’ So far, despite intensive research, the only hope of cure is surgery--the massive, radical chest surgery recently undergone by such prominent men as Gen. Nathan Twining, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and TV-radio star Arthur Godfrey.”

The article features a question and answer section with prominent researchers (excerpted below). A color advertisement for Pall Mall cigarettes (American Tobacco Co.) appears in the issue, with the slogan, “Get satisfying flavor...So friendly to your taste!...No flat filtered-out flavor.”

Cigarettes . . .

Q. Since the 1920s, the American death rate from lung cancer has spiraled upward: Each year, lung cancer kills 2,000 more Americans than the year before. What causes this rise?

A. One reason is that people today are living longer. Tuberculosis and pneumonia deaths have been sharply reduced. And cancer strikes mainly those over 50.

Q. But why is lung cancer increasing so much faster than all other cancers?

A. Scientists are investigating several possible factors, including air pollution radiation, diet, viruses, and cigarette smoking.

Q. What about cigarettes?

A. Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond, chief statistician for the American Cancer Society, believes increased cigarette smoking is the major factor in lung cancer's rise. Two years ago, with Dr. Daniel Horn, he announced the results of a statistical study of 187,783 white males aged 50 to 69. They reported that men who smoked two or more packs of cigarettes a day had a death rate from lung cancer 60 times as high as nonsmokers.

Q. What ingredient in cigarettes may cause lung cancer?

A. Some U.S. scientists are searching for specific cancer-causing agents in tobacco tars. Dr. Hammond doubts they will find any. “More likely, we will find that cigarette smoking puts a general strain on the body,” he predicted. “It's as though a seriously ill man were to run up a flight of stairs and drop dead. The flight of stairs didn't make him sick. Just the same, it did bring about his death.”

Q. On what grounds, then, has the Tobacco Industry Research Committee questioned the Hammond-Horn findings?

A. Dr. Clarence C. Little, the committee's scientific director, has pointed out that the Hammond-Horn study failed to take into account such other possible factors as sex, personality, and previous infections. His view is shared by a Mayo Foundation statistician, Dr. Joseph Berkson,* who recently said that no statistical study to date has defined the biology of lung cancer.

*Even after the publication in 1964 of the first Surgeon General's report on smoking and health, Berkson [1899-1982] continued to disagree with the epidemiologic evidence that smoking caused lung cancer.