

KEN BURNS PRESENTS
CANCER
THE EMPEROR OF ALL MALADIES
A FILM BY BARAK GOODMAN

EPISODE DESCRIPTIONS

Episode One: Magic Bullets (March 30, 2015/9-11PM)

Episode One centers on the story of Sidney Farber's evolution from obscure pathologist in the basement of Boston Children's Hospital to renowned scientist (the "father of chemotherapy"), and powerful public advocate who, together with the philanthropist Mary Lasker, galvanizes the federal government's War on Cancer. The episode also ventures back in time to recount the stories of the early efforts to understand and fight the disease, from medieval apothecaries to the first use of radical surgery and radiation at the turn of the 20th Century. And it projects forward to today, to tell the moving stories of two children grappling with leukemia, the disease that Farber did more than anyone to conquer.

Along the way, the episode illuminates several important themes from the history of cancer: how science evolves through both careful experimentation and serendipity; how difficult it is to balance bold scientific exploration and compassion for patients, particularly children; and how vital it is to the conquest of any disease to galvanize broad public support.

Episode Two: The Blind Men and the Elephant (March 31, 2015/9-11PM)

Episode Two chronicles the vital decades between the declaration of the federal government's War on Cancer in 1971, and the breakthrough drugs Herceptin and Gleevec in 2000. This tumultuous thirty-year period was characterized by a widening chasm between the research lab, in which vital discoveries were finally illuminating the most basic nature of the cancer cell, and the clinic, in which frustration over the lack of new therapies led some to take more and more extreme measures to fight the disease. By the end of the century, however, the gap between lab and clinic had been bridged, and the first targeted therapies – drugs based on an understanding of the cancer cell's vulnerabilities – were coming into wide use.

This episode shifts ground from childhood leukemia -- the disease that dominated research in the 50's and 60's -- to breast cancer -- the disease that becomes the focus of the next phase of the war on cancer. Like the first episode, this one is textured with the contemporary story of a patient, a breast cancer surgeon who herself is diagnosed with the disease and must decide how to fight it.

Episode Three: Finding the Achilles Heel (April 1, 2015/9-11PM)

Episode Three covers the years from 2000 to the present. As the millennium dawns, there is enormous optimism that the “targeted therapy revolution” will rapidly result in the conquest of cancer. But, as more and more is understood about the variety of genetic mutations that underlie cancer, and about the cancer cell’s adaptability, optimism gives way to despair. In place of quick cures, many call for a new strategy of prevention and early detection, which hold the promise of curtailing or stopping some cancers before they take hold.

By the second decade of the 2000s, however, the daunting complexity of the cancer cell begins to resolve into a more manageable picture, as new discoveries find order in the chaos. New strategies, such as combination therapy, hold the promise of finally overcoming many of the most intractable types of cancer. The show ends with the moving stories of two patients undergoing the latest therapies harnessing their own immune systems to defeat their cancers. Viewers are left on a note of enormous hope and optimism that within a generation many, if not all, cancers will have been converted from fatal to chronic diseases.