

KEN BURNS PRESENTS

CANCER

THE EMPEROR OF ALL MALADIES

6 x 60, 3 x 120 HD



PBS

INTERNATIONAL

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Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies, a six-hour documentary series directed by award-winning filmmaker Barak Goodman, executive produced by Ken Burns, and based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (Simon & Schuster 2010) by Siddhartha Mukherjee, M.D., tells the comprehensive story of cancer, from its first description in an ancient Egyptian scroll to the gleaming laboratories of modern research institutions. The series interweaves a sweeping historical narrative with intimate stories about contemporary patients, and an investigation into the latest scientific breakthroughs that may have brought us, at long last, within sight of lasting cures.

Magic Bullets

The search for a cure for cancer is the greatest epic in the history of science. It spans centuries and continents, and is full of its share of heroes, villains, and sudden vertiginous twists. *Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies* follows that centuries-long search, but centers on the story of Sidney Farber, who, defying conventional wisdom in the late 1940s, introduces the modern era of chemotherapy, eventually galvanizing a full-scale national “war on cancer.” Interwoven with Farber’s narrative is the contemporary story of little Olivia Blair, who at 14-months old is diagnosed with T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia, which spreads to her brain and spinal column. The film follows her as she and her parents struggle with the many hardships and decisions foisted upon a cancer patient. She remains in full remission a year after her diagnosis, but is still on her journey to finish her three-year treatment plan.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Flush with optimism and awash with federal dollars in the wake of the declaration of a “war on cancer” by Richard Nixon in 1971, the cancer field plunges forward in search of a cure. In the lab, rapid progress is made in understanding the essential nature of the cancer cell, leading to the revolutionary discovery of the genetic basis of cancer. But at the bedside, where patients are treated, few new therapies become available, and a sense of disillusionment takes hold, leading some patients and doctors to take desperate measures. It is not until the late 1990s that the advances in research begin to translate into more precise targeted therapies with the breakthrough drugs Gleevec and Herceptin. Following the history during these fraught decades, the film intertwines the contemporary story of Dr. Lori Wilson, a surgical oncologist who is diagnosed with invasive breast cancer in both breasts in 2013. Her emotional and physical struggles with the disease provide a bracing counterpoint to the historical narrative.

Finding an Achilles Heel

In a moment of buoyant optimism in the cancer world, scientists believe they have cracked the essential mystery of the malignant cell and the first targeted therapies have been developed, with the promise of many more to follow. But very quickly cancer reveals new layers of complexity and a formidable array of unforeseen defenses. In the disappointment that follows, many call for a new focus on prevention and early detection as the most promising fronts in the war on cancer. But other scientists are undeterred, and by the second decade of the 2000s their work pays off. The bewildering complexity of the cancer cell, so recently considered unassailable, yields to a more ordered picture, revealing new vulnerabilities and avenues of attack. Perhaps most exciting of all is the prospect of harnessing the human immune system to defeat cancer. Patients Doug Rogers, a 60-year-old NASCAR mechanic with melanoma, and Emily Whitehead, a six-year-old child afflicted with leukemia, are pioneers in new immunotherapy treatments, which the documentary follows as their stories unfold. Both see their advanced cancers recede and are able to resume normal lives.

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CREDITS

Ken Burns Presents CANCER: THE EMPEROR OF ALL MALADIES A Film by Barak Goodman is a production of Florentine Films, Laura Ziskin Pictures and WETA Washington, DC, in association with Ark Media.

Executive Producer and Senior Creative Consultant: Ken Burns

Writers: Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns, and Barak Goodman and David Blistein.

Based on the book *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* by Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee.

Producer, Director: Barak Goodman

Executive Producers: Dalton Delan, David S. Thompson, Pamela Oas Williams, and Laura Ziskin

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