**NEW BOOKS, BRIEFLY NOTED**

21 December, 2007

Mom’s Cancer by Brian Fies.New York: Abrams Image, 2006.

Cancer Vixen: A True Story by Marissa Acocella Marchetto; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

The Archeology of Disease, third edition by Charlotte Roberts and Keith Manchester; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

False Hope: Bone Marrow Transplantation for Breast Cancer by Richard A. Rettig,

Peter D. Jacobson, Cynthia M. Forquar, and Wade M. Aubry; New York:Oxford University Press, 2007.

In recent years, graphic novels have become increasingly popular among adults. The easiest way to describe a “graphic novel” is as an “adult comic book.” These hard bound books are often fantasy stories involving science fiction characters. Some of them, however, have tackled quite serious topics. Perhaps the most widely discussed are the two Maus books by Arthur Spiegelman concerning the Holocaust.

There are two very interesting recent graphic novels concerning cancer. Mom’s Cancer chronicles the story of the author’s mother’s diagnosis and treatment with chemotherapy and radiation therapy for small cell bronchogenic carcinoma. The portrayal of the differences between community medicine and academic oncology, a patient’s experience going through chemotherapy, the patient’s attempts to get in touch with a physician at night or on weekends, and the depiction of radiation therapy are breathtakingly accurate. The author has an uncanny knack for the nuance of facial expression. This book is highly recommended for teaching medical students and residents about a patient’s experience with cancer treatment.

Cancer Vixen is an autobiographical tale about the author’s experience with the diagnosis and treatment of early stage breast cancer. The author, a cartoonist for the The New Yorker, painstakingly describes her experience with lumpectomy, sentinel node biopsy, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. She devotes a considerable amount of the book to her interactions with friends, family, and the startlingly obnoxious comments made by acquaintances. A longer and considerably more narcissistic book than Mom’s Cancer, Cancer Vixen can also be read with profit by medical students and trainees.

The Paleopathology of Disease has a nice chapter on paleooncology. This is the study of cancer in the fossil record. By analyzing cancer in dinosaur bones, human remains from ancient burial sites, and mummies, we can gain an understanding of what forms of cancer animals have been subjected to over the ages and how the influence of environmentally mediated carcinogens such as excessive exposure to sunlight, alcohol, and tobacco have affected the forms of cancer in the population.

False Hope is a stunning book. It painstakingly chronicles how high-dose chemotherapy and autologous bone marrow rescue (ABMT) for adult advanced breast cancer was first developed and implemented. The authors studied how a cadre of physicians, convinced that this procedure was useful, promoted it in their publications. Women’s health advocacy groups grabbed on to the procedure and fostered it. Insurance companies were sued when they refused to pay for a procedure they deemed “experimental.” On the one hand, the plaintiff’s lawyer could assert that “my client, a 33 year-old woman with two children and advanced breast cancer has only one hope: bone marrow transplantation.” On the other hand the insurance company had a far more complicated argument to make about evidence-based medicine and the nature of insurance coverage. Insurance companies who considered the procedure experimental were pilloried in the press and in the halls of Congress and state legislatures. Ultimately, laws were passed to mandate insurance coverage for this procedure for certain federal employees and in some states.

Ultimately, several randomized prospective trials were conducted and, in a dramatic 1999 ASCO meeting, most of these studies were reported and showed that the procedure was of no benefit.The one study which did assert a benefit, conducted in South Africa, was eventually found to involve scientific fraud.

There is much to be learned from False Hope. It can teach us about the role of randomized prospective trials in cancer therapy. It is particularly chastening for those of us worried about the role of randomized prospective trials in proton therapy and IMRT. There are well-developed mechanisms for analyzing whether one form of chemotherapy is better or worse than another. There are not, however, carefully developed mechanisms for randomized prospective trials of radiation technology. The authors, including a physician, a lawyer, and a public health expert, devote the last chapters of the book to some policy recommendations to prevent medicine from repeating the mistakes of the ABMT story.

E. C. Halperin, M.D., M.A.

Dean

University of Louisville

School of Medicine