

SECOND OPINION



LAETRILE AT SLOAN-KETTERING



LETTER TO MY FORMER COLLEAGUES

Forty years ago this summer (1974) I was hired at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) to be its science writer in the Department of Public Affairs. The “war on cancer” was new, and MSKCC, under the direction of Drs. Lewis Thomas, Robert A. Good and Lloyd J. Old had been revitalized to face the challenges of the day.

The “war on cancer” meant a fresh infusion of vast amounts of cash and new leadership that had direct access to the President of the United States in order to expedite promising treatments. The leaders of the “war on cancer” actually promised the American public a “cure” for some major forms of cancer in time for the Bicentennial—July 4, 1976.

There was a renewed interest in various unorthodox methods of treating cancer. Public interest gravitated towards an unorthodox treatment called laetrile. This was an extract of apricot kernels, synonymous with a well-known cyanide-containing chemical, amygdalin.

Responding to a petition from 43,000 supporters of the drug, the US “cancer czar” Benno Schmidt asked MSKCC’s leaders to test the drug competently and fairly. They therefore asked the oldest and most experienced researcher, Kanematsu Sugiura, DSc, to test laetrile in various spontaneous tumor systems. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Over the course of five years, Sugiura found that laetrile exerted a profoundly beneficial effect not just on the health and well being of the mice but on stopping lung metastases. MSKCC’s pathology department confirmed his positive findings. The fascinating drama of what happened next is told in Eric Merola’s 2014 documentary on laetrile at Sloan-Kettering, *Second Opinion*, opening August 29th at the Cinema Village in Manhattan, and in my companion book, *Doctored Results*, available at Amazon.com.

Initially, the leadership of MSKCC affirmed Sugiura’s findings. Then they began to backtrack in public. In 1974 the American Cancer Society (ACS), threatened Dr. Good to back off from laetrile. Behind the scenes, Old tried to uphold Sugiura’s findings. But they did not win over their colleagues at the National Cancer Institute, the Food and Drug Administration or the American Cancer Society. At this moment, MSKCC leaders (and in particular Lewis Thomas) decided that the cause was hopelessly dangerous to himself and to his institution and so within weeks went over to the anti-laetrile camp.

Thomas wound up as a key witness against laetrile at Sen. Kennedy’s hearings on the topic in 1977, lying about Sugiura’s results with a straight face.

Eventually, the leadership issued an entirely negative summation of the laetrile testing program. (I myself wrote the official press release). I started a newsletter called “Second Opinion” to publicize the problems and contradictions in MSKCC’s official pronouncements. In November 1977 I went public with these accusations and was fired on the next business day for failing to carry out my “most basic job responsibilities.” I also wrote my first book, *The Cancer Industry*, about this and other cover-ups in the cancer research and treatment field. Yet for many years I have let the matter rest. Why then bring it up now?

First of all, a new generation of Americans, including most researchers, knows nothing about this controversy. Some of them were not even born when these events took place. Second, a terrible wrong was done to the reputation of one of MSKCC’s greatest scientists, Kanematsu Sugiura. For the sake of political expediency Sugiura was “thrown under the bus,” as we now would say. But, most importantly, pure amygdalin was an extremely promising anti-metastatic agent. It was certainly the most effective such agent discovered up until that time. To this day, if there are any better agents that have been proven as effective at preventing the spread of cancer they are unknown to me.

While progress has been made in understanding cancer in the past 40 years, effective treatments for preventing the spread of cancer are still few and far between. Laetrile was a lost opportunity—killed off in a cynical way. Unfortunately, the outstanding experimental results of Sugiura became the victim of a highly politicized vendetta.

Of course, there were nuances to the story. I therefore urge you to see the film *Second Opinion* and to read *Doctored Results*. These answer many of the questions that arise when investigating this controversy. Above all, I would urge MSKCC to reconsider its handling of the laetrile controversy. The facts, when considered without bias, show that Sugiura was both competent and honest, while those who were in power at the time lost their nerve and compromised the truth in a very shameful way.

- Ralph W. Moss, PhD
August 2014

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Ralph W. Moss, PhD

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“SECOND OPINION” DIRECTED BY ERIC MEROLA

EDITED BY ERIC MEROLA AND JON BARRATT MUSIC BY PETER VENNE

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AND LEWIS THOMAS, MD AND CHESTER STOCK, MD AND LLOYD OLD, MD AND MARTHA, BEN & MELISSA MOSS**

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