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Our History

The early years

The American Cancer Society was founded in 1913 by 10 doctors and 5 laypeople in New York City. It was called the American Society for the Control of Cancer (ASCC). At that time, a cancer diagnosis meant near-certain death. Rarely mentioned in public, this disease was steeped in fear and denial. Doctors sometimes did not tell their patients they had cancer, and patients often did not tell their friends and families that they had been diagnosed with it.

The Society's founders knew they had to raise public awareness about cancer if progress was to be made against this disease. Despite the enormity of their task, our founders and their colleagues set about writing articles for popular magazines and professional journals; publishing *Campaign Notes*, a monthly bulletin of cancer information; and recruiting doctors throughout the country to help educate the public.

It was in these early years that the Society first used its now-iconic Sword of Hope symbol, which today is part of the organization's logo. The sword came from a 1928 nationwide poster contest sponsored by the ASCC and the New York City Cancer Committee. George E. Durant of Brooklyn won the contest, receiving a first prize of \$500. He selected the sword to express the crusading spirit of the cancer control movement. The twin-serpent caduceus, which forms the handle of the sword, emphasizes the medical and scientific nature of the Society's work. Classically, twined serpents represent healing of the sick and creativity of the healthy.

Over the past 100 years, the logo has changed many times. The current American Cancer Society logo presents a contemporary, powerful, and cohesive entity. The trapezoidal shape with the angled edge suggests forward movement, aspiration, and growth. The overall design creates the image of a flag being carried forth toward victory. This symbol is intended to unite people in the common goal to save lives from cancer.

The Women's Field Army

In 1936, Marjorie G. Illig, an ASCC field representative and chair of the General Federation of Women's Clubs Committee on Public Health, made an extraordinary suggestion. She proposed creating a legion of volunteers whose sole purpose was to wage war on cancer. The Women's Field Army, as this organization came to be called, was an enormous success. Its recruits donned khaki uniforms, complete with insignia of rank and achievement, and went out into the streets to raise money and educate the public.

In 1935, there were 15,000 people active in cancer control throughout the United States. At the close of 1938, there was about 10 times that number. More than anything else, it was the Women's Field Army that moved the American Cancer Society to the forefront of voluntary health organizations.

New directions

In 1945, the ASCC was reorganized as the American Cancer Society. It was the beginning of a new era for the organization. World War II was over – the single greatest threat to modern democracy had been defeated – and the nation could at last focus its attention on the public health enemy at home. Many believed it was time for another bold move.

In 1946, philanthropist Mary Lasker and her colleagues met this challenge, helping to raise more than \$4 million for the Society – \$1 million of which was used to establish and fund the Society's groundbreaking research program. With the aid and assistance of dedicated volunteers like Lasker and Elmer Bobst, our research program began to bear fruit. In 1947, we also began our famous cancer signals campaign, a public education effort about the signs and symptoms of cancer.

Making progress

Around the same time the cancer signals campaign began, Dr. Sidney Farber, one of the Society's first research grantees, achieved the first temporary cancer remission in a child with acute leukemia using the drug aminopterin, thus opening the modern era of chemotherapy for cancer treatment. It was just the beginning of how scientists the American Cancer Society supported early in their careers would go on to make great leaps in understanding and stopping cancer.

Society-funded researchers have contributed to nearly every major cancer research breakthrough we've seen in the almost 70 years since the Society's research program

began. They've helped establish the link between cancer and smoking; demonstrated the effectiveness of the Pap test; developed cancer-fighting drugs and biological response modifiers such as interferon; dramatically increased the cure rate for childhood leukemia; proven the safety and effectiveness of mammography; and so much more. Since 1946, the American Cancer Society has invested more than \$4.9 billion in research, recognizing and providing the funding 49 researchers needed to get started and go on to win the Nobel Prize.

Expanding our reach

In the 1960s and 70s, the American Cancer Society began to expand its reach as an organization, working even harder to involve all sectors in its efforts to fight back against the disease.

In the 60s, the Society was instrumental in the development of the Surgeon General's report on the link between smoking and cancer when early Society-sponsored studies confirmed the connection. This upheaval in the perception of smoking laid the groundwork for tobacco control progress – and for the corresponding lives saved – that continues today.

Our advocacy later contributed to the passage of the National Cancer Act in 1971, which granted special funds and authority to expand the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and revolutionized the war on cancer. With the development of the NCI, the American Cancer Society also had to adapt to a new role – that of filling in the gaps of the federal government's focus in areas such as cancer prevention and education.

Likewise, as National Institutes of Health funding for young investigators has diminished, the Society has allocated more research grants to that generation, helping promising young medical researchers enter the cancer field. Today, the American Cancer Society is a global leader in the fight against cancer, working tirelessly to save lives by helping people stay well and get well, by finding cures, and by fighting back against the disease.

The Society is proud to have contributed to the work that has resulted in a 27% drop in the overall cancer death rate in the United States. That drop equates to 2.6 million fewer cancer deaths between 1991 and 2016. Progress continues and is currently estimated at 500 fewer cancer deaths each day.

Last Revised: 7/30/2019

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