

## BOOK REVIEW

### **A History of Prostate Cancer: Cancer, Men and Medicine** *by Helen Valier*

Hardback, 241 pages  
Palgrave Macmillan  
August 2016

Helen Valier's book fits within the genre of studies that situate the history of medicine and biomedical science within a wider economic and social context. By focusing on prostate cancer, she sets out to explore and explain a problematic feature of modern medicine: our failure to anticipate and react to the human consequences of technological innovation.

The early chapters of *A History of Prostate Cancer* – each focused on a discrete theme – follow a chronological course. The “prehistory” covers the signs and symptoms of urinary dysfunction, investigations of morbid anatomy and the findings of microscopy. Later topics include: surgical treatments and the advent of academic urology; experimental physiology, organotherapy and sex hormones; and randomized clinical trials, Veteran's Administration hospitals, and the Gleason score. This carefully crafted introduction sets up an informed exploration of more contemporary issues.

The author shows how the PSA test was turned from an assay to help monitor patients with prostate cancer into a questionable tool for the mass screening of healthy men, leading to over-diagnosis and over-treatment driven by market push, litigation fear and patient demand. She covers radiotherapy and highlights the rise of proton-beam therapy despite doubts about its efficacy in prostate cancer. Valier argues that screening for the healthy “pre-patient” has created a novel treatment pathway that sustains an expensive technology of uncertain value yet is not primarily driven by patient need.

Throwing a spotlight on the complex interplay of cancer, men and medicine is Valier's underlying purpose and, by intentionally focusing on problems, scandals and controversies especially as they manifest in the US, she succeeds in her objective. Readers looking for a more conventional history will find that certain topics – recent advances in surgery, drug therapy and immunotherapy – are sparingly mentioned. However, the text is well written, scholarly and richly referenced, making it a useful starting point for learning about the history of prostate cancer in all its aspects.

In conclusion, Valier delivers a worthwhile lesson about the unintended consequences of medical innovation that is relevant to the trainee doctors, healthcare professionals, biomedical researchers, industry executives and policy makers who will determine how new technologies affect the well-being of the public in the future.

**Edward J Wawrzynczak**  
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