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The Cancer Answer is no answer[Margaret Wente](#). [The Globe and Mail](#). Toronto, Ont.: [Apr 29, 2006](#). pg. A.17**Other available formats:** [Abstract](#)**Abstract (Summary)**

Before the hour is out, Ms. [Wendy Mesley] has informed us that cancer is on the rise, and is now an epidemic. Over shots of belching smokestacks, we're told several shocking things: Environmental factors are to blame. Carcinogens lurk everywhere, in our food, our cosmetics, our laundry detergent and a host of other common household products. The Canadian cancer establishment isn't interested in prevention, and has not informed the public of many avoidable risks.

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Wendy Mesley's well-meaning documentary has done cancer research a huge disservice

When the CBC's Wendy Mesley revealed early last year that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, the story made headlines. Ms. Mesley is one of the country's best-known and best-liked television personalities, and breast cancer is this generation's signature disease. When she returned to the air with a clean bill of health and a new, short, spiky hairdo, people cheered. She was a survivor.

Last month, Ms. Mesley starred in her own documentary special, called *Chasing the Cancer Answer*. This heavily promoted program chronicled her efforts to search out the possible causes of her own cancer, and to find out why there seems to be a cancer epidemic. It has been rerun several times in recent weeks. After all, April is National Cancer Month, and people have begun to lace up for this season's breast-cancer runs.

There's every reason to admire Ms. Mesley personally. But her journalism, in this case, is another matter. *Chasing the Cancer Answer* is stunningly simplistic. It peddles the biggest of the conspiracy-theory myths about cancer and its causes. It's full of misleading information and fear-mongering. It ignores a vast body of serious science. And it does a profound disservice to the public, many of whom rely on the public broadcaster for responsible and balanced journalism.

Ms. Mesley begins her piece on a personal note. "When I first got diagnosed," she says, "it was, Why me? I'm healthy, I eat my veggies. I exercise a lot. I try to lead a pretty clean lifestyle."

She soon concludes that she's been sold a bill of goods. Although she has done everything right, it doesn't matter, because her body is riddled with toxins. "They tested me for 57 chemicals. I scored on 44, which is not a good thing. I am full of carcinogens. And that's normal!" She wonders if she should blame the Pill.

Before the hour is out, Ms. Mesley has informed us that cancer is on the rise, and is now an epidemic. Over shots of belching smokestacks, we're told several shocking things: Environmental factors are to blame. Carcinogens lurk everywhere, in our food, our cosmetics, our laundry detergent and a host of other common household products. The Canadian cancer establishment isn't interested in prevention, and has not informed the public of many avoidable risks. Big drug companies aren't interested in prevention, because the more disease there is, the higher their profits. Big business isn't interested in prevention either, because it, too, prizes profits over people. Governments have been co-opted. We and our children are being poisoned, and the powerful vested interests are indifferent. Two environmental activists are sympathetically portrayed. "Their silence is killing us," one of them warns. "This is industry managed. This is very big business."

Ms. Mesley's star witness for the prosecution is Dr. Samuel Epstein, the foremost peddler of cancer conspiracy theories in the world today. He has little credibility in the world of cancer science, but he's a favourite of the CBC, and his new book, *Cancer-Gate: How to Win the Losing Cancer War*, is a bestseller. According to him, Canada is in the

grip of a cancer "epidemic."

"He's very outspoken about what we're not being told," Ms. Mesley informs us. "He says there are political decisions being made here in the interests of money."

Along the way, Ms. Mesley performs a drive-by mugging of the Canadian Cancer Society. To be sure, they didn't help themselves. Their CEO, Dr. Barbara Whyllie, was embarrassingly unready for a hostile interview. She was certainly no match for her opponent, who brandished a product called Magic Eraser. (It's supposed to remove crayon marks.) "It's got formaldehyde in it!" Ms. Mesley exclaimed indignantly. "Why is that on the shelves? No warning, no hint. Why is there not more pressure put on the manufacturers to get these products off the shelf?"

"I can't answer that question," her hapless victim answered lamely.

Advocacy journalism is all very well. But *Chasing the Cancer Answer* omits (or misstates) a number of important facts. To start with, there is no cancer epidemic. Overall cancer rates (as opposed to the number of cancer cases) have been relatively stable for more than a decade. While the incidence of some cancers have risen, others have fallen; overall, you have no more chance of getting cancer than you did 10 years ago. What pushes up the number of cases is that cancer is overwhelmingly a degenerative disease of older age, and our society is aging. Cancer is our second-biggest killer -- but that's because we're living long enough to get it.

As for the charge that cancer increases have come as a result of environmental conditions, according to [New York Times](#) science reporter Gina Kolata, most scientists think that only a tiny fraction of cancers might be caused by low levels of environmental poisons.

One leading cancer authority is Dr. Bruce Ames, of the [University of California](#). He too has a big interest in prevention. If Ms. Mesley had interviewed him, he would have made the point that the world is full of chemicals. Most of them are natural, and half of all natural chemicals (in high enough doses) are carcinogenic. There are 17 carcinogens in a cup of coffee. But it's the dose, not the chemical, that counts.

When it comes to breast cancer, a \$30-million federal study in the U.S. failed to find any links with pollution or other environmental factors. There is, however, a definite link to hormones. "We know how to prevent breast cancer," Dr. Ames has said. "You live like a Chinese peasant who lived 100 years ago. You work in the fields, on a meagre diet, so you have your first period at 17 and then you start having a child every year. It's a good recipe for not getting breast cancer but it isn't very practical." The key to cancer prevention won't be in eliminating trace elements of this or that from household products. The answers will probably lie in our own cellular biology.

After Ms. Mesley's documentary first aired, the Canadian Cancer Society got hundreds of calls and e-mails. Some people were angry that it wasn't doing more about prevention. A few volunteers resigned. Others were concerned about the slanted nature of the broadcast. Meantime, the CBC was bombarded with e-mails from anxious Canadians in fear for their children's lives. The Canadian Cancer Society wrote the CBC to protest the program's distortions, and asked that it not be aired again without added context and balance. The CBC's editor-in-chief, Tony Burman, told them to go fly a kite.

Like everyone of my age, I have several friends who've had breast cancer. Most survived; others did not. I've had friends who died of cancers of the pancreas, skin, lung, liver, ovaries and brain. Cancer is a gruesome knot of insidious diseases, and sometimes it truly does feel like an epidemic. And there are many important cancer issues worth investigating, from the problems posed by ultra-expensive new drugs to the fragmented nature of much of the research. What a shame, then, that Ms. Mesley chose to squander her considerable talent and credibility on a project of such dubious merit.

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