National Institutes of Health
Office of NIH History & Stetten Museum

Biomedical History Lecture Series

Molecular Medicine in the War on Cancer: Success or Failure?

Presenter

Robin Wolfe Scheffler is an Associate Professor of the History of Science and Medicine at MIT. He is the editor of *"100 years of Viruses and Cancer"* (2014) and author of *A Contagious Cause: The American Hunt for Cancer Viruses and the Rise of Molecular Medicine* (2019).

Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. ET
https://videocast.nih.gov/watch=44150

Details

"A virologist is among the luckiest of biologists because he can see into his chosen pet down to the details of all of its molecules." –David Baltimore, 1975

Accepting his Nobel Prize for his part in the identification of reverse transcriptase, David Baltimore reflected on the "luck" that virologists enjoyed in their ability to see into problems with molecular precision. Although this vision seems inspiring and compelling today, Baltimore spoke at a time of fierce debate among biologists, legislators, and clinicians as to what, if anything, this molecular approach to disease offered. Many were concerned that seeing into the molecular roots of illness left other problems invisible. This lecture will examine debates over the identification of human cancer viruses and the development of a cancer vaccine during the War on Cancer, an attempt larger than the Human Genome Project, as a case for understanding the promises and pitfalls of molecular medicine. As the 50th anniversary of the War on Cancer approaches, this history also provides an opportunity to reflect on the ramifications of how success or failure are defined for the future pathways of biomedical research.

Visit history.nih.gov for news of upcoming lectures.