



Vermont Public Radio
**“Rutland to Show Portion of Ken Burns
Documentary to Start Cancer Conversation”**

By Nina Keck • April 20, 2015

Ken Burns’ latest documentary on the history of cancer has generated a lot of media buzz around a disease that touches nearly everyone. Hospitals across the country are showing shortened versions of *Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies* to jumpstart community discussions about the illness.

Rutland will host a screening and discussion session Tuesday night.

According to the Vermont Department of Health, cancer is the leading cause of death in Vermont, having passed heart disease and stroke in 2007.

Dr. Allan Eisemann, head of oncology at Rutland Regional Medical Center, says he sees a significant number of lung and tobacco associated cancers which he attributes to smoking. He says the more people talk about cancer and how to prevent it, the better.

“Everyone has been touched by cancer in one way or another, so this is a non-medical way, with the documentary, that is more a biography of the history of cancer to give people some background. And it’s an opportunity to interact with people who are discussing cancer related things,” he says.

Eisemann says Burns’ film was especially fascinating to him because it highlighted work done by early cancer pioneers like Sidney Farber.

Eisemann’s father, Gustave, was also an oncologist who trained with Farber in Boston in the 1950s. “He had lunch with these guys, he knew these guys,” says Eisemann. “And if you remember, Sidney Farber was treating these pediatric leukemic patients with this new drug.”

It was an innovative approach that showed remarkable success, leading many to consider Farber the father of modern chemotherapy.

Farber’s successes and failures influenced generations of oncologists, including Eisemann’s father. “My father was one of the first people to use a drug called methotrexate, which was a new drug in the 1950s. Nobody really knew if would help or how it would help,” says Eisemann. “And they would come out of a lab on one side of the hall with a syringe, on the other side of the hall would be the patients, and they would just walk across and give people these new drugs that they were developing. And some of them had amazing benefit. So it was really like a true pioneer ring time.”

Eisemann says unlike his father, he feels fortunate to practice at a time when cancer outcomes are so much better. “The treatments that we give today, 50 percent of them at least didn’t exist when I started practicing 25 years ago,” he says. Thanks to all the advances, he says, “There are people that we cure now who would have died when I was in training.”



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But what does Eisemann say to patients who wonder whether they'd get better treatment or more options in a bigger city?

The Rutland oncologist says he does recommend that patients with particularly complicated health issues or complex cancers get a second opinion.

"We can't do bone marrow transplants here," he says. And there are some specialty surgeries that are not done in Rutland. But Eisemann says, "For nine out of 10 people, we can do the therapy that they need."

That's important, because he says most cancer patients need to keep working and do better when they can stay close to family and friends.

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Eisemann says if he comes across new research or a trial he thinks may help one of his patients, he picks up the phone. "Oncology is still a relatively small community of people and they want to help patients. If there's a patient that needs something, an oncologist in Boston, Texas or San Francisco will say, 'Send me the notes and we'll see the patient and we're happy to take care of them.'"

Eisemann says 15 or 20 years ago, people weren't as comfortable talking about cancer, death or end-of-life issues, and he says Tuesday's film screening and discussion session are a good example of how that's changing for the better.

Correction 11:23 a.m. 4/22/15 An earlier version of this story misstated a statistic relating to cancer rates in Vermont. It is the leading cause of death in the state, not the second leading cause. Cancer is the second leading cause of death nationally. And according to the state health department, approximately 19 percent of Rutland county adults age 18 and older are current smokers, compared to 18 percent of Vermonters.