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This is an abstract of the article. An updated version was completed in 2012.

The essay reviews historical and contemporary theories of the etiology of cancer, including ancient humoral theories, folk theories of trauma, and contemporary theories of microbial, chemical, hereditary, and immunological causes. Two types of ethical issues are discussed. Ethical issues in the patient-clinician encounter include how much information to give the patient, whether or not the patient's family members should be informed (especially in the case of a type of cancer with a strong hereditary factor), how clinicians should approach patient's decisions to withdraw from treatment for adults and children, and how clinicians should approach patient's decisions to pursue complementary and alternative treatments. The second type of ethical issue involves research funding and the problem of "undone science," that is, the systematic non-funding of some types of research questions. In the case of cancer, undone science includes the lack of support for non-patented therapies such as dietary programs, mind-body therapies, and nutritional supplements and herbs. The government could view research funding in this area as a market failure and provide compensatory research funding, but the willingness of federal government agencies to do so in the U.S. and several other countries has been limited.