

# Early Detection



KIRSTEN E. GARDNER

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Dispelling the common notion that American female cancer activism is a post-1970s phenomenon, Kirsten E. Gardner traces women's cancer education campaigns back to the early twentieth century. Focusing on breast cancer, but using research on cervical, ovarian, and uterine cancers as well, Gardner's examination of films, publications, health fairs, and archival materials shows that women have promoted early cancer detection since the inception of the American Society for the Control of Cancer in 1913. While informing female audiences about cancer risks, these early activists also laid the groundwork for the political advocacy and patient empowerment movements of recent decades. By the 1930s there were 300,000 members of the Women's Field Army working together with women's clubs. They held explicit discussions about the risks, detection, and incidence of cancer and by midcentury were offering advice about routine breast self-exams and annual Pap smears. The feminist health movement of the 1970s heralded a departure for female involvement in women's health activism, Gardner explains. Women continued to encourage early detection but simultaneously demanded increased attention to gender and medical research, patient experiences, and causal factors. Our understanding of today's vibrant feminist health movement is enriched by Gardner's work recognizing women's roles in grassroots educational programs throughout the twentieth century and their creation of supportive networks that endure today.

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