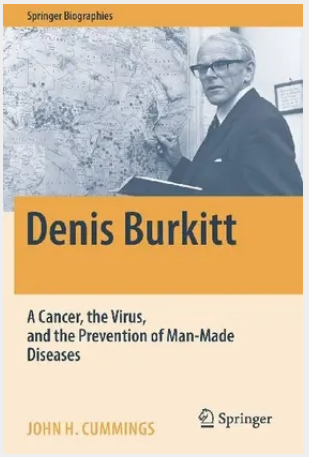
Cummings

Denis Burkitt

A Cancer, the Virus, and the Prevention of Man-Made Diseases



This biography of Dr. Denis Parsons Burkitt, after whom the childhood cancer Burkitt's lymphoma was named, and who was a pioneer of the dietary fiber movement, paints a personal but holistic portrait of both the man and his life's work. Featuring excerpts from Dr. Burkitt's personal diaries, spanning seven decades from his boyhood to just before his passing, and extensive family archives, this book invites readers to follow Burkitt's journey through life and experience his tribulations and successes. Prof. John Cummings was a colleague of Dr. Burkitt and weaves the tale of his life through the lens of family, faith, and science.

The journey takes Burkitt from his childhood in Ireland, a country undergoing major social upheaval, through his medical studies in Dublin, to army service in Africa in the midst of WWII and the independence movements that swept the continent in the following years. During his two decades spent in Uganda, working for the Colonial MedicalService, Burkitt made his first major contribution to cancer research - the characterization of Burkitt's lymphoma and its possible viral cause. Following his return to England in 1966, he turned his attention to the cause of ‘Western Diseases’ especially the role of dietary fibre in the prevention of disease and promotion of health. This earned him even wider international recognition and helped to inspire what is a vital field of research today. The book examines Burkitt's personal views of the world around him, including his experiences as a committed evangelical Christian who had been raised an Irish Protestant, and the challenges, both familial and cultural, that this elicited from and towards him and his scientific work.

The lymphoma and later the fibre story propelled Denis into an orbit of worldwide travel, fame and many honours. An engaging speaker but man of great humility, always giving the credit for much of what he did to others, he left a legacy of evidence and ideas for the causes of cancer and prevention of disease from which we all now benefit.

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53,49 €
49,99 € (zzgl. MwSt.)

Lieferfrist: bis zu 10 Tage

Artikelnummer: 9783030885656
Medium: Buch
ISBN: 978-3-030-88565-6
Verlag: Palgrave Macmillan
Erscheinungstermin: 21.02.2023
Sprache(n): Englisch
Auflage: 1. Auflage 2022
Serie: Springer Biographies
Produktform: Kartoniert
Gewicht: 663 g
Seiten: 417
Format (B x H): 155 x 235 mm

Kundenservice Verlag Dr. Otto Schmidt KG
Neumannstraße 10, 40235 Düsseldorf | kundenservice@otto-schmidt.de | 0221-93738-997 (Inland)