

CANCER

Alan Rickman, a versatile actor with the most wonderful voice has died of pancreatic cancer. Like Bowie he was just 69.

Andrew Griffin wrote about a 2008 study in which a bunch of people were asked “to rate 50 voices and then looked at the results. It found that the best performances had a combination of good tone, speed, frequency, words per minute and intonation – and Mr Rickman came out first.” For me a close second would be John Gielgud who co-starred (as the man-servant Hobson) in ‘Arthur’ with Dudley Moore. Here’s an example of a beautifully delivered ‘posh putdown’:

Moore: “Hobson, do you know the worst part, the WORST part of being me?”
Gielgud: “I should imagine your breath, Sir.”

Rickman’s voice is instantly recognisable. Younger fans tend to know him best for the ‘Harry Potter films but a couple of others stick in my mind. He was wonderful in ‘Truly Madly Deeply’, an Anthony Minghella film in which he co-starred with Juliet Stevenson. Then there was Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves in which he acted everyone else off the set. Heather Saul in the Independent wrote a piece which carried the headline: “Alan Rickman admits editing 'terrible' script with friends in Pizza Hut behind backs of writers on Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves.” She says: “Speaking on stage, he told the audience that one conversation in the "terrible" script with two women was actually the work of his friends Ruby Wax and Peter Barnes. Rickman said he met Barnes in a branch of Pizza Express, according to The Times. “I said, ‘Will you have a look at this script because it’s terrible, and I need some good lines.’ So he did, and, you know, with kind of pizza and bacon and egg going all over the script.” Barnes then edited a scene where his character would have been running down a corridor, telling him: “You should have a wench in a doorway, and then you should say, ‘You. My room, 10.30,’ and then turn to the other wench and say, ‘You, 10.45’.” He said Wax later added: "And bring a friend.” The lines were then secretly added in by the director, Kevin Reynolds. “Nobody knew this was happening except him," Rickman continued. "And I knew it had worked because as I cleared the camera I saw about 80 members of the crew just go [mimed trying not to laugh].”

I discovered a substance that had no mass, and I was like "OMG!"

In just one week, two stars were snuffed out by ‘cancer.’ When it comes to pancreatic cancer, around 8,800 people are diagnosed in the UK each year. They say: “God takes the good ones first” and that is often the case with Ca pancreas – it seems to go for the brightest and best. Saul reminds us that “Steve Jobs, Patrick Swayze and Pavarotti all died of pancreatic cancer. Sir John Hurt is currently the only famous survivor of the disease.” She quotes the charity, ‘Pancreatic Cancer Action’ (PCA) which told The Independent: “Pancreatic cancer is sometimes called a ‘silent cancer” because the early symptoms are often vague and unrecognised. Pancreatic cancer receives just one per cent of research funding. Considering it’s the fifth biggest cancer killer, we think this is disgraceful.”

Cancer Research UK is, as ever, a fund of information: We’re told: “At the moment, there is no screening test reliable enough to use for pancreatic cancer in people at average risk. Cancer of the pancreas is also a relatively uncommon disease. It would cost a lot of money to screen everyone for a disease that only a few people get. So any screening test must be simple and cheap to perform.”

Screening for the disease is, by and large, confined to those with a clear-cut family history and a strong predisposition at present.

So the mainstay at present is prevention. Cancer Research UK lists some of the 'causes' saying "Cigarettes, cigars, pipes and chewing tobacco all increase pancreatic cancer risk. A large Cancer Research UK study looking at lifestyle factors found that nearly 1 in 3 pancreatic cancers (about 30%) may be linked to smoking."

You'll have guessed another common cause (if you didn't know it already): "About 7 out of 10 cases of chronic pancreatitis are due to long term heavy drinking. Chronic pancreatitis is a known risk factor for cancer of the pancreas. Some research suggests there may be a link between heavy drinkers and risk of pancreatic cancer. The risk is higher in people who drink 3 or more alcoholic drinks a day compared to those who drink less than 1 alcoholic drink a day."

Cancer research UK has some more 'risk factors' on its list: "People with diabetes have an increased risk of pancreatic cancer. Diabetes is a disease of the pancreatic cells that normally make insulin. It is possible that a growing cancer actually causes some cases of diabetes, rather than the diabetes causing the cancer." Some now believe that people over 50 who develops diabetes and have unexplained weight loss should be investigated for other pancreatic disease, and to rule out pancreatic cancer. The rationale is that most people who develop diabetes late in life are overweight, so diabetes and weight loss together are more unusual.

Being overweight is a risk factor for a number of cancers – and pancreatic cancer is no exception, "A study has estimated that just over 1 in 10 pancreatic cancers (around 10%) in the UK in 2010 were linked to being overweight. This increase in risk could be because overweight people make more insulin. Insulin is a hormone made by the pancreas."

As for reducing your risk, the World Cancer Research Fund says that physical activity may protect against pancreatic cancer. For more info Google: Cancer Research Uk Pancreatic cancer risks and causes.

As for those who get it ... if you're lucky it's caught early whilst it's operable/still confined to the pancreas (in other words before it's spread.)

Dr John