When a Friend Dies of Pancreatic Cancer

By Alex Berezow — September 12, 2017

My heart sank when I received the news.

Nearly two years ago, my friend and colleague, Sam Chi, called to tell me that he had pancreatic cancer. I knew that was a death sentence.

There are various kinds of pancreatic cancer, and his was the most common type: adenocarcinoma. It was stage III, which meant that even though the cancer had not metastasized to other organs, it was locally advanced. The cancer had engulfed nearby blood vessels, making it inoperable.

Even under the best of circumstances, the five-year survival rate for pancreatic adenocarcinoma is devastating. According to the American Cancer Society, the five-year survival rate for stage IA is 14%; for stage III, it is 3%. Only somebody like Sam could survive those odds.

Sam and I met through the website RealClearPolitics. When I was hired as the founding editor of RealClearScience in 2010, he flew out to Seattle to mentor me (as well as Jeremy Lott, founding editor of RealClearReligion). Little did I know that this encounter would blossom into a lasting friendship.

Because we both worked remotely and in different cities, Sam and I rarely saw each other face-to-face. Yet, through the magic of technology, we grew fairly close. Sam was an avid sports fan (particularly of Bayern Munich and Germany’s national soccer team) and a bona fide college football expert. Whenever the Pac-12 college football conference was in action, I was constantly texting with him. The same was true for the U.S. men’s national soccer team.

As it turned out, Sam and I shared many of the same interests (sports, travel, U.S. politics, and European politics) and, unfailingly, he knew more about all of them than I did. He was also a
History buff. His breadth and depth of knowledge, combined with a tremendous work ethic, resulted in his managing or contributing to at least four different news websites simultaneously—and those are just the ones I knew of. It wouldn’t surprise me if there were others. His wicked smarts were surpassed only by his biting humor.

The one and only area I knew more about than him was science. And since I regularly read the biomedical literature, I kept an eye out for clinical trials involving new therapies for pancreatic cancer. Sam and his wife investigated several possibilities, but he never qualified for one. Apparently, patients have to be very sick in order to qualify, and Sam never got that sick—until it was too late.

In July 2016, I met Sam and his wife at The Cheesecake Factory in Seattle. He looked great. Though he had gone through chemotherapy, all of his hair had returned. He was talkative, energetic, and had a healthy appetite. When we parted ways, he said we should do it again next year. I truly believed that we would.

But it wasn’t to be. The statistics don’t lie: Pancreatic cancer is aggressive and cruel. By the next summer, the cancer had spread to his liver. On September 9, 2017, at the age of 48, he left this world.

And it will forever be a less interesting place.

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