

OBITUARIES

David Servan-Schreiber

Author of a bestselling book that promotes natural cures for cancer

Ned Stafford

David Servan-Schreiber, author (b 1961; q 1984, Laval University, Quebec City), died on 24 July 2011 from brain cancer.

David Servan-Schreiber, already successful as a psychiatric and neuroscience researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, was 31 years old when the unthinkable happened. It was autumn 1992. He and two colleagues had planned to conduct research using magnetic resonance imaging, but a student “guinea pig” had failed to show up. Dr Servan-Schreiber volunteered to lie down in the scanner for the experiments, his arms tight at his sides, “a little like [in] a coffin,” he later wrote in his bestselling book *Anticancer: A New Way of Life*. Before the experiment was over, a colleague in the control room told Servan-Schreiber over the intercom, “Listen, there’s something wrong. We’re coming in.”

It was malignant

Servan-Schreiber, a native of France who the year before had worked in Iraq with Médecins Sans Frontières, studied the images of his brain. He saw “a sort of a ball the size of a walnut” in the right hand region of his prefrontal cortex. Follow-up tests confirmed his fears: it was malignant. “No longer wrapped in the comfortable mantle of physician and scientist, I had become a cancer patient,” he wrote.

He underwent successful surgery, and the cancer went into remission. But in 2000 the cancer returned. After more surgery and chemotherapy he asked his oncologist for advice on leading a healthy life and avoiding another relapse. He was told there was “nothing special to do. Lead your life normally.”

Servan-Schreiber, by then a clinical associate professor and chief of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Shadyside Hospital, was not happy with the advice. A founding board member of the US branch of Doctors Without Borders, he had been exposed to traditional Asian medicine, such as acupuncture, meditation, and nutrition, while on a mission to Tibet. “I decided to learn everything I could to help my body defend itself against the illness,” he wrote. He knew chances of long term survival were not good but vowed to use his medical and research skills to “change the odds.”

He came to believe that the body has natural defences to “fight the process of tumour development” noting the lower rates of breast, colon, and prostate cancer in much of Asia compared with the West. His first book, *Healing Without Freud or Prozac*:

Natural Approaches to Curing Stress, Anxiety and Depression, was published in 2003.

Four years later, he published *Anticancer*, which told his story and those of other patients with cancer. He advocated a natural and holistic lifestyle that included a healthy diet with foods such as vegetables, olive oil, garlic, and green tea, which he believed had anticancer properties, as well as plenty of exercise and optimism. The book became an international bestseller translated into more than 30 languages. He became a hero to other patients with cancer and their families, speaking around the world and writing for magazines and his website (www.anticancerbook.com).

Edouard Servan-Schreiber, his brother, said that after the first relapse in 2000, David was not fighting the cancer in attempt to defeat it but rather was focusing on “living with the cancer,” accepting that in the end the cancer would win and that he would die. “In his mind,” Edouard said, “it was a question of, ‘How should I live my life? Do I give up or do I do all I can to extend and live my life fully?’”

However, many remained sceptical of Servan-Schreiber’s anticancer message. A review written by a doctor in the *New York Times* described the book as “worthy of the finest in nighttime television infomercials, where among all the financial advisers, kitchen gadget guys and acne specialists is one with a story so personal, heartfelt and sensible that you suddenly need exactly what he has to sell” (2008 Sep 6, www.nytimes.com/2008/10/07/health/07book.html).

Edouard said that his brother had no hard feelings about such scepticism. “He felt that scepticism is what moves science forward,” he said. But he added that his brother also felt that natural methods for preventing cancer would have trouble being embraced by the medical community because “they were not patentable. You can’t make money off of them.”

Most importantly, Edouard said that his brother always recommended that patients with cancer undergo “classical, standard medical treatments. He never recommended against using those classic weapons.”

David Servan-Schreiber was born on 21 April 1961, in the Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine into a prominent French family. His father was Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, a politician and journalist who cofounded the magazine *L’Express*. After earning a bachelors degree in 1977 at the Académie de Paris, he studied

medicine for four years at the University of Paris before moving to Laval University in Quebec City, Canada, where he earned his medical degree in 1984. He completed an internship in internal medicine and psychiatry at McGill University's Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal.

Edouard said that his brother decided on a career in medicine at the age of 12, adding, "He and our father were always deeply impressed by the North American medical achievements and scientific achievements. David wanted to be trained in the same environment."

"The big one"

After his second relapse in 2000, he quit daily medical practice and curtailed academic responsibilities. In June 2010 another

brain tumour was found. He underwent several treatments and was in and out of the hospitals. Another tumour—"the big one," as he described it—was found in February. Having survived for 19 years after his first diagnosis of brain cancer, he believed his natural methods had changed the odds, allowing him to live longer than he might have, his brother said.

He wrote a final farewell book that has already been published in France, *We Can Say Goodbye Several Times*, which will be published in English. He leaves his wife, Gwenaelle Briseul and three children.

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