Venerable Science Journalist Sharon Begley Dies of Lung Cancer

In her final article, Begley shone a light on the growing incidence of never smokers like her who develop lung cancer.

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In her final column for the Boston Globe–produced health website Stat, veteran science journalist Sharon Begley documented the plight of nonsmokers who develop lung cancer.

Unbeknownst to readers, she was describing her own situation. The article was titled "'But I never smoked': A growing share of lung cancer cases is turning up in an unexpected population."

Five days after filing the story, Begley died in a Boston hospital of complications of the disease, her husband of 37 years, Edward Groth, told The New York Times. She was 64.

Lung cancer is projected to kill approximately 131,880 men and women in the United States this year, making it the country's leading cause of cancer death by a significant margin. The biggest risk factor is a smoking habit or a history of smoking or another form of tobacco use.

But lung cancer is also diagnosed in people who "never put a cigarette to their lips," in Begley's words. The proportion of people with lung cancer who have never smoked is currently 12% and on the rise. Women with lung cancer are particularly likely never to have smoked.

But that trend doesn't necessarily indicate that the absolute number of never smokers developing lung cancer is higher than in previous years. A major reason for the relative increase is that smoking has declined nationwide. But the number of never smokers with lung cancer is so large that if never smokers' lung cancer were a stand-alone cancer, Begley reported, it would be among the top 10 for both incidence and mortality.

The growing proportion of never smokers raises several important questions, she wrote. One is whether lung cancer screening, now recommended for present and former longtime heavy smokers, may be appropriate for some never smokers too. Another is whether lung cancer in never smokers is different enough from the disease in smokers that it should be treated with new drugs now in development.

A Path Breaker in Science Journalism

Over the course of a career that spanned four decades in print and digital journalism, Begley broke down complex topics in clear, compelling prose for a lay audience. She covered topics as varied as dark matter, climate change, sickle-cell anemia, the origins of humanity and, yes, cancer.

Her ability to translate scientific discoveries and innovations into newsstand catnip, not to mention her versatility, cemented her reputation as one of the best science writers alive. Publication after publication sought her out for her range and accessible prose style. She left Newsweek for The Wall Street Journal in 2002, returned to Newsweek in 2007, was laid off from Newsweek in 2011, was hired by Reuters in 2012 and left Reuters for Stat in 2015.

In addition to news articles, Begley wrote four books on neuroscience, two with co-authors. Her writing won her a bevy of awards, including the Kavli Award and the Victor Cohn Prize, but her proudest achievement, according to her Stat obituary, was distilling technical subject matter into easily digestible stories. Her reputation preceded her. When Rick Berke, Stat's cofounder and executive editor, poached her from Reuters, it was on the advice of, well, everyone else in the field. In conversations about prospective hires, he recounted, one name kept coming up: Sharon Begley.

"She had remarkable range, she was a perfectionist about her craft, she was prolific, and her humanity came through in everything she wrote," Berke told Stat. "She was a guiding light for Stat from its inception."

Begley also served as a model for women hoping to break into the competitive field of science journalism. She herself had started out as a researcher at Newsweek in the 1970s, an era in which the magazine's workplace culture was still decidedly macho.

"When I was starting out as a science journalist, and, maybe equally important, as a female science journalist in what was then a very male-dominated profession, she was an incredible inspiration to me and my peers," Deborah Blum, the director of MIT's Knight Science Journalism Program, wrote in an email to Stat. "She was so good, so thoughtful a reporter, someone who could do a serious investigation while never forgetting that the people in the story mattered."

Notable as Begley's professional accomplishments were, they were only part of her life. She was frugal, clipping coupons to save money on groceries. And she was tough, as evidenced by the doorstop "the size of a grapefruit" that she carried in her backpack to wield against aggressive New York taxis, according to Groth and his two children with Begley, Dan Begley-Groth and Sarah Begley-Groth. Her friend and fellow Newsweek alumna Barbara Kantrowitz described her as "generous and kind" without being a goody two-shoes.

That said, she was totally committed to her craft. "If she was bored and needed something to do, she'd write another book," Groth joked to Stat.

For a firsthand account of a never smoker's bout with lung cancer, read "Out of the Blue." For more on the false public perception of lung cancer as a disease exclusive to smokers, read "The Stigma of Lung Cancer" and "The Lung Cancer Blame Game."

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