

Let's Play: Celebrity Brain Tumors!

Think your disease is hot stuff? It ain't worth a thing until it's got star power

BY MICHAEL FINLEY
Men's Health

I was all excited: *USA Today* was interested in my brain tumor! Well, not the tumor so much, but they *were* looking at a piece I had written about it, and my first conversation with an editor there went great.

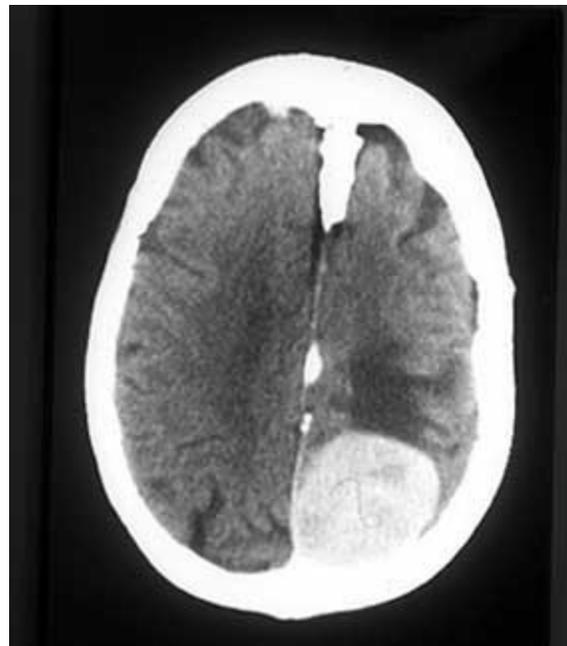
Finally, I hoped, my sort of tumor—a meningioma—would get the attention it so richly deserved. Research grants would follow. Nobel prize winners would focus their whole brains on my half one. I'd not only be cured, but bathed in sympathetic lighting. I was one lucky guy.

Then the email arrived.

"We liked your essay," the editor wrote. "But we have to say no. There are so many people with different ailments, and they are all so convincing, that we have made the editorial decision to only feature first-hand accounts of people who are already in the public eye."

It took a few moments for the words to register. I have a brain tumor—have I mentioned that already?—so maybe I'm a little slow. But this was it in a nutshell: the nation's newspaper only wants health stories if they're by or about celebrities. A story about the alien gnawing away at Mike Finley's brain wasn't news, no matter how bad the tumor or how good the writing. (And it was excellent!) But if Nicole Kidman came down with a meningioma, the paper was saying, it would be hot.

And this pissed me off. It was like approaching the velvet rope of public opinion and being stopped by a bouncer. It was like trying to confide a life and death matter to a



friend—and yes, I'd considered *USA Today* my friend, especially because of that dynamite sports section—and the friend replies, "Hey, I'd love to hear your story, only there's a problem: Nobody gives a flying Wallenda about you."

That's when I realized: If I hope for a cure, I'll need a celebrity endorsement for my brain tumor.

This quest actually began back in January 1999. I was doing situps in my upstairs office when I felt something happen inside my head, from the exertion. It felt like my brain was melting—from contact with a blacksmith's poker jammed through my skull. Within a week I had my diagnosis: my meningioma was about the size of a croissant, curled behind my left ear. This noncancerous but nonetheless unpleasant fellow had been residing there quietly for as long as a couple of decades, until it caused a major vein in my head to dry up and snap off (medical term: *thrombose*). Hence the moment of mind-searing pain (the one *before* the email from *USA Today*). My tumor, doctors informed me, was inoperable – too close to the language center of the brain to risk going in. But, with any luck – cross fingers –it will just continue to sit there.

With that, I gained a new hobby and lots of new friends. I read up on brain tumors, and I talked to dozens of survivors, wanting to be one myself. And I began subscribing to online bulletin board where people like me, with benign croissants and other cancerous pastries tucked under their skulls, discuss their harrowing experiences, their surgeries, their outcomes -- and sometimes their impending deaths. Think it can't happen to you? Or Nicole? Well, every year, 350,000 Americans are diagnosed with brain tumors, so you may already be a winner and not know it. It's not clear what causes them, and there are many varieties. My meningioma is the least horrible of a grisly lot. They'll kill 15,000 of us this year.

But you never hear about them. May is a National Brain Tumor Month (May), which only the editors of Men's Health seem to be keenly aware of. But it hasn't caught on elsewhere, perhaps because of the limited gift-giving options. But I'm out to change all that by attracting some star power to my cause. Think about it. Why do celebrities exist? So we don't have to pay attention to one another. There's just too doggone many of us. Instead we appoint proxies, identifiable stand-ins for certain points of view. Thus Jerry Lewis for MD, Charlton Heston for Alzheimer's, Sally Struthers for Christian Children, Michael Jackson for victims of excessive plastic surgery.

Sure, I was bitter about *USA Today's* policy, but I'll let you in on a dark secret. One reason I wanted to talk about brain tumors was because I thought I finally had an issue people had to care about, one that could make *me* a bit of a celebrity. I wanted to

matter, too! Meningioma might be my ticket to fame. And if I mattered, maybe having the thing there wouldn't be so bad.

I could almost hear the chatter:

"Hey, isn't that that guy with the thing in his head? Cool!"

"Talks pretty good for a guy whose brain shares skull space with a bolus of runamok cell metabolism."

"A front row table for you, Mr. Finley! With your usual, six Advils and a glass of mint iced tea!"

Sigh. The *USA Today* rejection made those pleasant thoughts vanish. I turned, disconsolate, to my friends at the brain tumor listserver. "They didn't want my story because I'm not famous," I said.

Amidst the chorus of sympathy, one clear voice stood out: "Well, maybe they're right," Cheryl said. "Maybe that's just how it is, and we should select a celebrity spokesperson, like those other diseases."

And so began an online scheme to locate someone who was famous, attractive, had a brain tumor and could still talk, and coerce that person into being the hood ornament for our malady. It was no simple task. Most of the really good brain tumor victims reveal their condition by dying from it. Presidential candidate Pat Paulsen is long gone, as is conductor Otto Klemperer. Ditto reggae star Bob Marley; political schemer Lee Atwater; Cornelius from *Planet of the Apes*, Roddy McDowell; film critic Gene Siskel; actress Susan Hayward; NFL founder Pete Rozelle and player Lyle Alzado; CIA director William Casey; Negro League slugger Josh Gibson, modern-day screwballer Dan Quisenberry; Royals and Yankees manager Dick Howser and reliever Tug McGraw of the "Ya Gotta Believe" Mets; director Francois Truffaut; *Rhapsody in Blue* composer George Gershwin; *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley. (Wouldn't she have been great at penning celeb op eds, though? And that Elsa Lanchester hairdo is exactly how my tumor feels to me.)

Our celebrity brain tumor list took on a life of its own. In all, we culled nearly 300 names of celebrities who had survived a brain tumor, died from one, or had a loved one die of one. (Are you listening Tim McGraw? Better yet, how about you, Mrs. Faith Hill

McGraw? We're ready when you are.) Surely, we'd be able to recruit a spokesperson for the cause. One name of the 300 stood out, bathed in glamour, drama, and stagecraft: Elizabeth Taylor. If you could get Elizabeth Taylor, you didn't need Sandy Duncan or Arlen Specter (both survivors, but rather long in the tooth, at that).

She's not just a queen of multiple facelifts, hip replacements, respiratory ailments, and painkiller addictions. In London in 1997, she also had surgery in London to scoop out a meningioma . That's *my* tumor, people! "I've been pronounced dead, not able to breathe, and I went to the tunnel with the white light, all of that," she declared. "So I have a great appreciation of every day I wake up breathing. Colors, different tastes, different smells—I appreciate it all on a different level." Out of all the talk-show wanabees queuing up for their moment in the bright lights, Liz has got the street cred only public suffering can convey. So our little group wrote her a letter, inviting her to amplify our voices with hers. We pictured her sitting on a shiny divan with Barbara Walters, maybe wearing one of those turbans she likes, explaining what a meningioma was and what it meant to her. It would be great.

Only, we never got so much as a *USA Today*-style reject note. She never replied. Our online group was crushed, unleashing a salvo of chat messages. "Here we had a celebrity of the first magnitude," wrote Anne. "And a great chance to do some education about brain tumors, and she wouldn't discuss it. Thanks heaps, Liz."

"I understand some people from the American Brain Tumor Association asked Taylor to speak up about it" wrote Terry. Terry knows everything about Liz Taylor. "Miss Taylor's office informed them that she has decided not to make a big deal about brain tumors, because she's already so identified with AIDS. AIDS is so important to her. She doesn't want that compromised."

"I disagree," wrote Marie, who once explained that her meningioma seemed to make her more analytical. "I think it's all for our consumption. Being a spokesperson for AIDS makes her seem like an angel of show business. Whereas, actually *having* a brain tumor harms her image, and makes people think of her as unglamorous. So she bailed."

And that was it. Within a few months I stopped subscribing to the listserv. I found that, when I spoke to people with more serious brain tumors, it freaked me out, and made me think my own tumor was more serious than it was. The web is a health paranoiac's hell-zone, filled with unfiltered suggestions about everything that just might be going wrong. If you're at all suggestible, or feeling vulnerable, you probably oughtn't to go there.

But every now and then, I still allow myself to dream. I'll see some celeb's face peering up at me from the checkout line, and think: Maybe she's the one? Maybe he'll put us over the top! I imagine all of them having things in their heads. And they don't know it! Paris Hilton. The guy from Creed. Kevin Costner, with one the size of a baseball. But you wouldn't know it from those rueful, over the shoulder glances.

Guys, when you find out, if I am still around, call me. I've got an in at *USA Today*.

SIDEBAR: Is it a headache, or is it a brain tumor? Check it out at [N:\MHNYTransfer\PA2NY\From Research-Art Ref](#)