

Famous performers and sportsmen tend to have shorter lives, new study reports

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Fame and achievement in performance-related careers may be earned at the cost of a shorter life, according to a study published online today in *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*.

Based on the premise that an obituary in the New York Times (NYT) usually implies success in one's career, Professor Richard Epstein and Catherine Epstein analysed 1000 consecutive obituaries published in the NYT during 2009-2011 in terms of gender, age, occupation, and cause of death. They separated subjects into four broad [occupational categories](#): performance/sport (including actors, singers, musicians, dancers, and sportspeople), non-performing creative (including writers, composers and visual artists), business/military/political, and professional/academic/religious.

The gender distribution of NYT obituaries was found to be strongly skewed towards males over females (813 vs. 186). In terms of occupations, younger ages of death were apparent in performers/sports (77.2 +/- 1.7) and creative workers (78.5 +/- 0.8), whereas older ages of death were seen in professionals/academics (81.7 +/- 1.4) and in business/military/political careers (83 +/- 1.2). Moreover, although the life expectancy for a US citizen born today is about 76 years for males and 81 years for females, the average age of death for NYT males was older (80.4), and females younger (78.8) than these averages; this was associated with a higher proportion of NYT females than males in performance/sports (38% vs. 18%) and fewer in professional careers (12% vs. 27%).

When the authors looked at causes of death, they found that earlier deaths were associated with accidents, infections (including HIV) and certain cancers. In general, cancer-related deaths were more frequent in performers (27%) and creative workers (29%), and somewhat less frequent in professional/academic (24%), military/political (20.4%), and sports careers (18%). More specifically, lung cancer deaths – which the authors considered a likely indication of chronic smoking - were commonest in people whose career was performance-based (7.2%), and least common among professionals/academics (1.4%).

Professor Epstein, who is Director of the Clinical Informatics & Research Centre at The Kinghorn Cancer Centre, St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, commented: "A one-off retrospective analysis like this can't prove anything, but it raises some interesting questions. First, if it is true that successful performers and sports players tend to enjoy shorter lives, does this imply that fame at younger ages predisposes to poor health behaviours in later life after success has faded? Or that psychological and family pressures favouring unusually high public achievement lead to self-destructive tendencies throughout life? Or that risk-taking personality traits maximise one's chances of success, with the use of cigarettes, alcohol or illicit drugs improving one's performance output in the short term? Any of these hypotheses could be viewed as a health warning to young people aspiring to become stars."

More information: 'Death in the New York Times: the price of fame is a faster flame' by C.R. Epstein and R.J. Epstein *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, [DOI: 10.1093/qjmed/hct077](https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hct077)

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