

## With a little help from his friends ... Joe Cocker's early death

Written by The Conversation

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Joe Cocker, the Sheffield singer who died on December 22, will always be remembered as one of the most searing, unforgettable voices of the past forty years. Ten of his best songs can be found [here](#). “[Mad dog](#)” Cocker embodied the quintessential hard-living rock star lifestyle: he drank and smoked hard and “[dived in head first](#)” with drugs for decades.

Public grief about sudden or early celebrity deaths can see public hunger for information about what the person who died went through, requests by relatives for condolence donations to research, treatment and prevention efforts and increases in [personal interest and concern](#) about the diseases involved.

News reports of Cocker's death almost all noted that he had died of small cell lung cancer. About [90%](#) of lung cancer in men occurs in those with prolonged histories of smoking. In [2000](#) Cocker said he had smoked up to 40 cigarettes a day until he quit nine years earlier. While quitting by middle age can greatly reduce subsequent risk of smoking-caused disease, the risks of lung cancer unfortunately do not revert to those of people who have never smoked.

On the day his death was announced I tweeted:

Dying at 70, Cocker effectively lost one day in eight off the life expectancy the average Englishman has today ( [80](#) years).

Over the next 24 hours I was given a shellacking by a dozen or so e-cigarette users united in their apoplexy that I had mentioned Cocker's smoking. A Brian Carter exercised considerable reserve in deciding that mentioning Cocker's smoking meant I was “reprehensible, shameless, cowardly, disgusting, mean-spirited, repugnant”.

Another knew that I was “using a man's death” to further my aims. Those would be those shameless, repugnant aims of preventing smoking-caused death and disease, shared by the governments of [179 nations](#), the number to have ratified the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

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We will of course all die. But the sad part of Joe Cocker's death is how early it occurred. Like Cocker, the 50% of long-term smokers who die from tobacco-caused disease lose an average of [ten years](#) of life.

If we assume that Cocker started smoking at 16, quit at 47 and smoked on average, a conservative 30-a-day across that time, he would have smoked some 339,683 cigarettes, and pulled carcinogenic smoke deep into his lungs 3.39 million times. And that's saying nothing of the smoke-filled venues he would have often worked in, particularly early in his career.

It takes about six minutes to smoke a cigarette. So at 30 a day, Cocker would have been smoking for three hours each day, a cumulative 3.9 years of his 31 smoking years. Losing ten years off life expectancy, each cigarette he smoked took about two-and-a-half times the time he took to smoke it off the life expectancy he might otherwise have enjoyed. (339,683 cigarettes x 6 minutes = 2,038,098 minutes smoking vs 1,440 minutes a day x 365.25 days x 10 years = 5,259,600 minutes forgone).

Ninety percent of smokers [regret](#) ever starting to smoke and about 40% make a serious quit attempt each year, with most failing. Joe Cocker [experience](#)  
[d](#) the harm  
smoking was doing him and quit.

Confused calls for a cone of "respectful" silence about smoking's role in cancer and other tobacco-caused disease and for euphemisms about deaths following "a long illness" are forged by the same mentality that thinks tobacco packs should not have graphic health warnings because they might remind people too well about what smoking can do.

*Simon Chapman AO does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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