TuSalud

Aretha Franklin Estate Backs Rare Tumor Research Fund, One Year After Her Death

Here’s what to know about neuroendocrine tumor, the rare pancreas cancer that claimed the life of the Queen of Soul.

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On the one-year anniversary of Aretha Franklin’s death, the singer’s estate has launched a new research fund to help battle and raise awareness for the cancer that claimed her life, Rolling Stone reports.

Franklin died in August 2018 after a battle with neuroendocrine tumor (NET), a rare form of pancreatic cancer. The disease, which affects just 7% of pancreatic cancer cases, also claimed Apple CEO Steve Jobs’s life in 2011.

According to Franklin’s doctor Phillip A. Phillip, MD, a Detroit-based oncologist at the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute, patients with pancreatic neuroendocrine tumors have a relatively long life expectancy and less severe symptoms than other, more common forms of pancreatic cancer. The downside, however, is that with milder symptoms many patients don’t get diagnosed with NET until later in their battle with cancer, a fact that can sometimes prove fatal.

Researchers also aren’t sure what causes most cases of NET, categorizing the tumor as a so-called “sporadic cancer” with very few known risk factors beyond certain genetic predispositions. The condition is treatable with surgery, chemotherapy, injections and even certain oral drugs—though it’s more likely that it will become fatal if it spreads to other organs.

To help bridge this gap in knowledge and awareness about the disease, Aretha Franklin’s estate launched the Aretha Franklin Fund for Neuroendocrine Cancer Research on the anniversary of her death. The fund was launched in partnership with Detroit Women’s Informal Network, which also held a benefit in conjunction with the singer’s estate. Proceeds of the benefit will support donations to the Boston-based Neuroendocrine Tumor Research Foundation (NETRF).

“A lot of the work we fund is basic science in the laboratory, learning why these tumors grow and spread, said Elyse Gellerman, NETRF’s CEO, in a recent interview with the Detroit Free Press. “We don’t know all the answers about that. Researchers are trying to understand these tumors at the cellular level and—with some treatments available—why some patients respond and others do not.”

Gellerman also added that the organization is excited about the awareness the new fund will bring to the disease, noting that the neuroendocrine tumor research community was frustrated when the media initially misreported the cause of Franklin’s death as the more common form of pancreatic cancer.

Franklin was initially diagnosed with NET in 2010, although she kept the diagnosis private, staving off rumors about her health for years. She died after living eight years with the disease. Two of her doctors, in a recent interview with The Associated Press, recalled how she persevered, handling her diagnosis and treatment with “grace” and the “grit” to keep performing for years.

To read the full Rolling Stone article, click here.

To read an interview with Franklin’s doctor about the disease, click here.

To read the AP article based on her doctors’ interview about her grace and grit, click here.

For further reading, check out “Cancer Health Basics: Pancreatic Cancer”
