



Does comedy kill? A retrospective, longitudinal cohort, nested case–control study of humour and longevity in 53 British comedians



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 November 2014

Accepted 22 November 2014

Available online 26 November 2014

Keywords:

Comedy

Longevity

Death

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This work aims to test the hypothesis that the funniest comedians are most at risk of a premature death and reduced longevity compared to their relatively less funny counterparts.

Methods: A retrospective longitudinal cohort study with a nested case–control analysis of longevity of 53 male British comedians born between 1900 and 1954 was conducted. All comedians were given a subjective score from 1 (relatively funny) to 10 (hilariously funny) by the study investigators. The survival profile of all comedians was then examined adjusting for decade of birth, whether they worked in a comedy team and their comedy score. A nested case–control analysis examined the longevity of those comedians working in teams according to their pre-specified status within the team (straight/less funny versus funny team member).

Results: On an adjusted basis, there was no correlation between the decade of birth (HR 0.94, 95% 0.65 to 1.38 per incremental decade; $p = 0.763$) and comedy team status (HR 1.13, 95% 0.51 to 2.48 versus independent comedian; $p = 0.761$) with longevity. However, an increasingly funny comedy score was associated with increased mortality (HR 1.24, 95% CI 1.06 to 1.44 per unit funny score; $p = 0.006$). Of the 23 comedians adjudged to be very funny (score 8–10), 18 (78%) had died versus 12 (40%) of the rest; mean age at death 63.3 ± 12.2 versus 72.3 ± 14.7 ($p = 0.079$). Within comedy teams, those identified as the funnier member(s) of the partnership were, on an adjusted basis, more than three times more likely to die prematurely when compared to their more serious comedy partners (HR 3.52, 95% CI 1.22, 10.1; $p = 0.020$).

Conclusions: These data suggest that elite comedians are at increased risk of premature death compared to their less funny counterparts. Mental health issues and personality characteristics that help shape their comedic talent and success may well explain their reduced longevity and raises serious issues for identifying and mitigating their risk of a premature death.

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1. Introduction

The recent and tragic death of the comedy genius Robin Williams at the age of 63 highlights the often paradoxical nature of comedians and their humour; particularly the tension between their on-stage versus private persona. Anecdotal, an early death appears to be a common phenomenon among comedians and there is some early evidence to support this [1]. The untimely death of the British comedian Rik Mayall represents another high profile example. However, this apparent phenomenon may well just reflect media interest in celebrity events. Despite this uncertainty, we hypothesised that the premature death of Robin Williams and other elite comedians highlights a previously unrecognised and untested association between extent of comedic ability to make people laugh and reduced longevity. Recognising the

methodological issues inherent to any such analyses and a myriad of confounders we selected a cohort of male British and Irish comedians from a similar era and compared their longevity according to their comedic ability overall and according to their status as either the “funny” or “straight/stooge” man within comedy teams.

We tested the hypothesis (in the null form) that, relative to their less humorous counterparts, elite comedians (i.e. the funniest of their generation), by virtue of the factors and characteristics that help them to achieve this status, are at increased risk of premature mortality.

2. Methods

This was a retrospective, longitudinal cohort study with a nested case–control analysis. All study data were publically available and no ethics approval was sought.

2.1. Study setting

In order to limit the number of confounders, including childhood environment and exposure to whole society risk factors such as poor dietary behaviours and smoking, we selected only British (English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish) and Irish (Southern Irish) comedians of a certain era for this analysis.

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2.2. Study endpoints

We examined all-cause mortality in the entire cohort with censoring of survival status on the 1st June 2014. The earliest born selected comedian (John Le Mesurier) was born in 1912 and the latest Griff Rhys Jones and Mel Smith in 1953.

2.3. Selection criteria

We prospectively confined our cohort to those born between 1900 and 1954 to ensure a sufficient number of fatal events (as middle-aged adults onwards) for study comparisons and our ability to reliably and consistently rank selected comedians according to their comedic ability based on a combination of childhood and adulthood exposure as Baby Boomers. A popular website (accessed August 2014) that ranks the best of British and Irish comedians was reviewed; the majority were males and to reduce gender confounding we excluded any female comedians from our analyses (<http://www.ranker.com/crowdranked-list/funniest-british-and-irish-comedians-of-all-time>).

All male comedians identified in this list and performing in the target era were therefore identified and included in the study cohort. An additional 7 male comedians born in the same era and who formed a famous partnership (predominantly acting in tandem as the “straight” man or stooge for jokes) with pre-selected comedians were also added for comparative purposes. All 53 comedians were prospectively designated as individual comedians ($n = 19$) or those predominantly working in comedy duos or teams (16 groups represented).

2.4. Comedy ranking

Prior to determining definitive survival status (semi-blinded given some deaths were readily known), we ranked all 53 comedians according to their ability to make us and other people laugh on a scale of 1 to 10. Those scoring 5 and below were considered to be relatively funny, 6–7 pretty funny and 8–10 ranging from very funny to hilarious (i.e. elite comedians from our perspective).

Those working in comedy duos (e.g. Morecambe and Wise) or teams (e.g. Monty Python) were also designated as the “funny” or “straight” man in that comedy team.

2.5. Statistical analyses

All study analyses were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.0. Significance was accepted at the level of $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). Continuous data are presented as a mean \pm standard deviation and categorical data as an absolute number (with percentage). A Cox proportional hazards model (entry) was constructed to examine the independent correlates of all-cause mortality adjusting for the following variables – decade of birth (entered as 1 to 5), independent versus team comedian and comedy score (entered as 1 to 10 according to our ranking). A second model with comedy scores dichotomised as 1 to 5 or 6 to 10 was used to generate adjusted survival plots on this basis. Excluding independent comedians, a third model compared survival among team comedians only according to their identified role as the “funny” versus “straight” man adjusting for decade of birth.

3. Results

3.1. Study cohort

Of the 53 selected comedians, 23 were still living (mean age 74.3 ± 8.3 years) and 30 had died (mean age at death 66.9 ± 13.7 years) – see Table 1 for the list of comedians. According to our comedy index the mean score was 6.3 ± 2.7 , with 23 comedians adjudged to be very funny (score 8–10). Overall, 18 were classified as independent comedians and 35 as being famous for working in comedy tandems or teams.

3.2. Comic ability and longevity

According to adjusted analyses there was no correlation between the decade of birth (hazards ratio 0.94, 95% 0.65 to 1.38 per incremental decade; $p = 0.763$) and comedy team status (hazards ratio 1.13, 95% 0.51 to 2.48 versus independent comedian; $p = 0.761$) and longevity. However, an increasingly funny comedy index score was independently associated with premature mortality (hazards ratio 1.24, 95% CI 1.06 to 1.44 per unit funny score; $p = 0.006$) – see adjusted survival plot in Fig. 1. To put this in further perspective, of the 23 comedians adjudged to be very funny (score 8–10), 18 (78%) had died versus 12 (40%) of the rest; mean age at death 63.3 ± 12.2 versus 72.3 ± 14.7 years ($p = 0.079$).

Table 1
Study cohort.

Comedian	Birth year	Age*	Deceased	Team comedian	Comedy ranking
John Le Mesurier	1912	71	1	1	3
Sid James	1913	63	1	1	9
Bill Owen	1914	85	1	1	7
Arthur Lowe	1915	67	1	1	6
Frankie Howerd	1917	75	1	0	8
Spike Milligan	1918	84	1	0	10
Frank Thornton	1921	92	1	1	3
Peter Sallis	1921	93	0	1	4
Tommy Cooper	1921	63	1	0	10
Eric Sykes	1923	89	1	1	9
Benny Hill	1924	68	1	0	9
Tony Hancock	1924	44	1	0	9
Ernie Wise	1925	73	1	1	2
Peter Sellers	1925	55	1	1	10
Warren Mitchell	1926	88	0	0	5
Kenneth Williams	1926	62	1	1	8
Eric Morecambe	1926	58	1	1	9
Leonard Rossiter	1926	58	1	0	9
Brian Wilde	1927	80	1	1	4
Bob Monkhouse	1928	75	1	0	4
Ronnie Barker	1929	76	1	1	10
Ronnie Corbett	1930	84	0	1	2
Windsor Davies	1930	84	0	1	3
Les Dawson	1931	62	1	0	8
Richard Briers	1934	79	1	0	4
Trevor Bannister	1934	77	1	1	6
Melvyn Hayes	1935	79	0	1	2
James Bolam	1935	79	0	1	4
Dudley Moore	1935	67	1	1	5
John Inman	1935	79	0	1	5
Richard Wilson	1936	78	0	0	6
Dave Allen	1936	69	1	0	8
Rodney Bewes	1937	77	0	1	3
Peter Cook	1937	58	1	1	9
Frank Kelly	1938	75	0	1	4
John Cleese	1939	75	0	1	10
David Jason	1940	74	0	1	6
Graham Chapman	1941	48	1	1	9
Terry Jones	1942	72	0	1	5
Michael Crawford	1942	72	0	0	8
Billy Connolly	1942	72	0	0	10
Eric Idle	1943	71	0	1	6
Michael Palin	1943	71	0	1	7
Roger Lloyd-Pack	1944	69	1	0	3
Jasper Carrott	1945	69	0	1	9
Tony Robinson	1946	68	0	0	4
Richard Beckinsale	1947	32	1	1	3
Robert Lindsay	1949	65	0	0	3
Alexei Sayle	1952	62	0	1	8
Dermont Morgan	1952	46	1	1	9
Nigel Planner	1953	61	0	1	3
Griff Rhys Jones	1953	61	0	1	6
Mel Smith	1953	61	1	1	9

* Age at death or study census date.

3.3. Longevity within comedy tandems or teams

Consistent with the inherent nature of comedy tandems and teams, individual members were predominantly born around the same time (if not same socio-economic background). On an adjusted basis, those comedians pre-specified as the funnier or funniest members of the team, were more than 3-fold more likely to die during the follow-up period than the designated “straight” man (adjusted hazard ratio 3.52, 95% CI 1.22, 10.1; $p = 0.020$) – see Fig. 2.

4. Discussion

Within this cohort of British comedians born in the first half of the 20th Century and voted by the public as the funniest of their generation we determined that on an adjusted basis, increasing ability to make

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