Rallying call to help raise funds for cancer research once more

One of the results of Covid-19 is that funding which might have been raised for certain charities has been diverted or lost to those charities.

Cancer Research UK is one of those, depending on a great deal of fundraising by people across the country, and anticipating a £160 million drop in their income in the year ahead.

Dr Juan-Carlos Acosta is a researcher at the Cancer Research UK Edinburgh Centre at the University of Edinburgh, and his work is funded by the charity. He is back in his lab now after going home to Spain to attend a memorial service for his father who died from Covid-19 in March 2020. Dr Acosta senior was 79 when he died, and a highly-respected doctor who became Director of Public Health for the province of Burgos in Spain. He had led the region against outbreaks of bird and swine flu.

Juan-Carlos senior started to show Covid-19 symptoms in his care home in Burgos in early March. He was admitted to hospital after his symptoms worsened, but he died ten days later. Neither his wife, Maribel, nor any of his family was able to see him in hospital or be with him when he passed away.

Dr Juan-Carlos Acosta (left) with his father who died in March 2020

There is now a Covid-19 testing facility at the University of Edinburgh which Dr Acosta junior helped to set up during the lockdown. In between carrying on his cancer research from home, Juan-Carlos used his expert knowledge and skills to help develop the COVID-19 testing process at the facility at the university's Institute of Genetic & Molecular Medicine, which was set up to support NHS Lothian to increase its testing capacity at the peak of the outbreak in Scotland.

Now he is backing the urgent call from Cancer Research UK for funding from donations.

Juan-Carlos said: "The cancer research that has taken place in the last 20 to 30 years, funded by Cancer Research UK and others, has made a huge difference to the number of people who survive cancer today. If the funding and the research stops, it's going to be detrimental to people in the future."

He continued: "You can imagine that in some laboratory somewhere, there may be a vial with a drug that could make the difference for some people with cancer. But if research stops, if the funding stops, this drug will come much later and it's

going to cost lives.”

“My father always said he worried that a global pandemic like this was one of the risks we would face in the future. And it happened, and he was one of the people who died from it.”

Juan-Carlos said: “It was really tough for the whole family. For me, it felt very strange the day my father died. Under normal circumstances I would have expected to be booking a flight home and starting to make funeral arrangements, but I couldn’t do anything. I was stuck at home in Edinburgh.

“In the end, the arrangements all happened very fast. Because it was the peak of the pandemic in Spain they were moving very quickly, and my father was cremated the next day with only my mother and my brother present. It was really difficult for me not to be able to be there, to hug my mum and my brother and to close the chapter of my father.”

He and his team study how cells alert the body when they are in danger of becoming cancerous, and the body’s natural responses to remove or destroy these damaged cells.

Juan-Carlos explained: “When the DNA in normal cells becomes damaged, and the cells are primed to become cancerous, there are several natural systems in the body that stop the development and growth of these cells.

“The aim of our research is to better understand these natural systems that act as a defence against cancer and use this information to design new treatments that could activate these natural defences to stop cancers from growing.

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“Our research has shown positive results in lung cancer, and we are starting to take this forward now.”

Dr Victoria Steven, Cancer Research UK spokesperson for Scotland, said: “We’re grateful to Juan-Carlos for helping to underline the stark reality of the current situation.

“With more than 32,200 people diagnosed with cancer every year in Scotland***, we will never stop striving to create new and better treatments. But we can’t do it alone.

“Whether they donate, sign up to Race for Life at Home or shop at our recently re-opened stores in the city – with the help of people in Edinburgh we believe that together we will still beat cancer.”

Cancer Research UK was able to spend over £8 million in Edinburgh last year on some of the UK’s leading scientific and clinical research.

Thanks to the generosity of its supporters, the charity currently funds around 50 per cent of all publicly funded cancer research in the UK.

Donate if you can at cruk.org/give