

Paper 4 Death Certificates – Cause of Death

Interpretation by Dr Andrew Crowther Retired GP

Question: *Could these death certificates be related to illnesses that could be attributed to the First World War?*

Norman C. Healing

7 April June 1926	Norman Canning Healing	Male	43 years	77 Barkstone Gardens Kenington Major R.A.	(1) Cerebral Tumour 1 year 6 months (2) Respiratory failure No P.H. Certified by M. Cameron M.D.	A.G. Burns General at the Death John Alexander Military Hospital Hillbank	Stewart June 1926	H.F. Franklin Registrar.
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– presumably he had developed symptoms of a cerebral tumour a year and a half before his death in 1926, such as fits and loss of function of parts of his body, similar to a stroke. His doctors could have made the diagnosis of a brain tumour then. **Tying this diagnosis to war service would be very difficult, and I am not aware of increased incidence of brain tumours due to gassing or Inhalation of explosive remnants. But respiratory failure in a 43 year old could certainly have been the result of the damage that gas did to lungs in young men.** He is described as being a Major in the Royal Artillery, no suggestion that he had worked in a dusty or sooty environment before the war which could have exacerbated his condition. Smoking, of course, was universal at the time and would also have affected his breathing.

Thomas Drinkwater

104 1924 February	Thomas Edwin Drinkwater	Male	32 Years	Bricklayers	1. Epithelioma of Tongue 2. Asthenia Certified by V. W. Holroyd M.D.	G. Drinkwater Father present at death 1. Clifford Street Nelson	1924 February	H.B. Simms Registrar.
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– **Epithelioma of the tongue, or cancer of the tongue, was much more common in former decades when men smoked clay pipes.** They would get tumours that are comparatively rare today on their lips and tongue from the abrasive effect of the clay (and perhaps constituents within the clay).

Asthenia is a 'catch all' phrase [still used occasionally] saying that he faded away, but an inoperable cancer of the tongue made eating very difficult causing relative starvation.

Vyvyan Robeson

57	Seventeenth October 1923 Tewkesbury H. B.	Vyvyan Arthur Hemming Robeson	Male	29 Years	Squadron Leader (Major) Royal Air Force	1. Sarcoma of Omentum No post. certified by Dr. Lawrence M.R.C.S.	A. H. Robeson Father present at death Wellington Tewkesbury Road Buckingham	Eighteenth October	After Simms
								1923	Registrar.

— son of the vicar of Tewkesbury Abbey, Hemming Robeson, is said to have died from a Sarcoma of the Omentum. A sarcoma is a nasty cancer of soft tissue, and the omentum is a fatty apron inside the abdomen which spreads itself over the intestines. Exactly what the omentum does is open to discussion, but it seems to have immune activity and mops up stray infection. It is a soft tissue throughout, so cannot be seen on Xrays (and ultrasound and MRI scans were not invented in 1923). Since there was no PM I must assume that the diagnosis had been made during a laparotomy operation on his abdomen prior to his death. Sarcomas are rare tumours and are thought to sometimes be due to trauma to the tissue. They also occur in muscles and patients sometimes attribute the tumour to a former injury at the same site. **So, dying in 1923 one could perhaps suggest that had he sustained an injury to his abdomen during the war, this rare tumour might have resulted. But that is only a wild suggestion!**

Cecil Cole

Cause of death *acute gastro enteritis*

P.F. 27. B.

PENSION ISSUE OFFICE,
MINISTRY OF PENSIONS,
BROMYARD AVENUE,
ACTON, LONDON, W.3.

P.I.O. { Effects. 8/10/24

CAPTAIN BARLING,
Liaison Officer,
5 Ministry of Pensions,
Burton Court,
Chelsea, S.W.3.

RECORD & PAY OFFICE
6 - AUG 1924

NOTIFICATION OF DEATH.

Particulars relating to an ex-soldier who has died are given below:—

Name (in full) *Cecil Cole*

Regiment *3rd Bn Gloucesters*

Regimental No. *6006* Rank *PLC*

Date of { Enlistment *15.12.00*

{ Discharge *20.4.15*

{ Death *26.4.24*

Place of Death *Tewkesbury*

Cause of Death *acute gastro enteritis*

1916: 26th February: Cecil Cole of St Mary's Lane invalided from service after serving with the 1st Gloucesters in the early part of the war, until he sustained a severe wound in the hand which incapacitated him for service,