

21 March 2020, 12:32pm

My father's fight with coronavirus:

My father Robin Hanbury-Tenison had a podcast interview with The Spectator on Monday. He has a new book out – on pandemics, rather well timed – about which Sam Leith of this parish was keen to interview him. But in the end he had to postpone it. On Monday, he couldn't get a sentence out without uncontrollably coughing. He had just come back from skiing in France, and the government advice still said that the Alps were safe.

He and my mother had considered cancelling, but their insurance wouldn't have given them a refund. So they were careful to always wash their hands thoroughly and didn't go to any large gatherings. Besides, though he is 83 years old, he's the fittest man I know. We ran the London Marathon together for his 80th birthday, we ride horses across Bodmin Moor whenever the weather allows and he still beats me at tennis. He doesn't take any medication and has no existing health conditions.

But when he got back he developed a slight temperature and a dry persistent cough. After a day in bed spent grumbling, he got up the next day to deal with some emails. But still, he was short of breath and feeling rather frustrated. I persuaded him to come outside. It's a beautiful time of year in our garden. The primroses are out, the snake's head fritillaries are just starting to bloom and bees are busily racing from each new blossom to the next. Normally my father rushes around, excitedly pointing out each new change and looking for some of his favourite flowers. He's rather embarrassed about our montbretia, which he says is looked down upon in horticultural circles, but is very proud of the purple loosestrife that we have in abundance.

But even a walk was taxing. He wheezed and coughed, and got angry with himself for being so slow. He reminded me of a mountaineer at the top of a high mountain where oxygen is scarce. I got him back to the house, where he slumped onto a sofa, and we phoned 111. The good people there were very efficient and sent an ambulance. The crew arrived, took one look at him and immediately donned hazmat suits and face masks. He thought it was hilarious.

The last five days have been hellish. The ambulance took him to Derriford Hospital in Plymouth. He was put in an isolation ward, with a number of tubes feeding in and out of him. He's now been diagnosed with the dreaded. At the beginning, he WhatsApped the family and kept us up to date, even though he was clearly exhausted, nervous, and scared. I asked one of the doctors to take him some pears, his favourite fruit.

But even then fluid continued to fill his lungs and at 4am on Wednesday, he was sedated and put on a ventilator. He is still under sedation now as we hope that his lungs drain over the weekend.

A doctor cheerily told him that, for someone of his age and in his current condition, he has a 20 per cent chance of survival.

I write this because there are a lot of people still scoffing at the government's advice. But a British stiff upper lip isn't enough. My father is healthier than most 60 year olds and still, his decline was rapid – over a matter of a few days. My pregnant wife and I will be self-isolating for the next 12 weeks.

Alongside this, it is a time for kindness. Call any elderly relatives or neighbours that you have, donate to a foodbank if you can and show support to anyone in your community who might need it. This is likely to last longer than most of us predict. I also want to thank the emergency care providers who were kind, professional and extremely efficient. Where would we be without them?

WRITTEN BY

Merlin Hanbury-Tenison

IMPORTANT DON'T FORGET TO SHARE WIDELY