

Event

Roald Dahl and the big friendly neuroscientist



Roald Dahl will always hold a special place in the hearts of generations of children as the author of such classic tales as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Fantastic Mr Fox*, and *George's Marvellous Medicine*. Adults are just as likely to remember him as the creator of macabre short stories such as *Lamb to the Slaughter* or as the screenwriter behind the musical extravaganza *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* or the James Bond flick *You Only Live Twice*.

Yet few will know about Dahl's fascination with neuroscience and the hours that he spent during his final days discussing medicine with junior doctor Tom Solomon, who is now professor of neurology and director of the Institute of Infection and Global Health at the University of Liverpool, UK. During a talk at the Edinburgh International Science Festival on April 14, 2015, Solomon shared stories about the time he spent with Dahl in the weeks leading up to the writer's death on Nov 23, 1990.

Dahl was being treated for the acute leukaemia that would eventually claim his life, which had developed from myelodysplastic syndrome. Solomon was on duty one night in every three and would sit and talk with Dahl, who he described as being "a tall man with twinkling eyes and big ears", much like Quentin Blake's illustration of the Big Friendly Giant (or BFG), one of Dahl's most famous creations. The pair sat and talked about Solomon's malaria research; Dahl's interest in the subject was sparked during his own time in Africa. They also discussed "literature, medicine, love, and death".

"I'm not frightened of dying", Dahl told Solomon. "I saw my daughter do it aged seven, and if she could do it then I can do it too." His favourite quote, Solomon added, was: "My candle burns at both ends, it will not last the night, but ah my foes and oh my friends, it gives a lovely light."

The loss of his eldest daughter, Olivia, in 1962 from measles was one of a series of medical tragedies and triumphs to hit his family and, over the course of his talk, Solomon cleverly used stories from Dahl's life to teach his audience some basic neuroscience. Dahl was so deeply affected by the death of Olivia that he became involved in vaccination campaigns and wrote extensively about measles.

Two years before Olivia's tragic death, Dahl had enjoyed the first of his medical triumphs. His son, Theo, developed hydrocephalus after his pram was hit by a car when he was 4 months old. A stent was inserted into his head to drain the fluid, but the valve kept blocking. Setting out to solve the problem, Dahl teamed up with Kenneth Till of Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, UK, who was the first full-time paediatric neurosurgeon in the country, and toymaker Stanley Wade. Together, they invented the Wade-Dahl-Till valve.

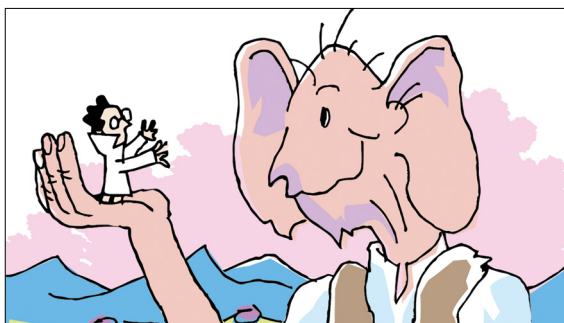
A second triumph came in 1965 after Dahl's first wife, the American actress Patricia Neal, suffered a series of strokes that left her with right-sided weakness and difficulties in talking. At a time when stroke victims were often left to sit in corners, Dahl instigated a "vigorous" rehabilitation programme for Neal, thanks to which she was eventually able to return to her stage and screen work. The experience also led Dahl to a life-long involvement with the then Chest, Heart & Stroke Association, now known simply as the Stroke Association.

Solomon is a skilful and experienced science communicator who clearly not only held his audience's attention at the science festival but also entertained them. His delivery was light, almost to the point where it was reminiscent of a stand-up comedian at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and he regularly used audience participation, roping in two unsuspecting medical students to demonstrate how a reflex hammer could stimulate the patella into involuntary actions, as part of his discussion about the frontal lobe and its role in controlling movements.

One of the most amusing parts of Solomon's talk demonstrated how Dahl used art to imitate life. Neal suffered damage to her parietal lobe during her strokes, which led to her mixing up her words, with some of her mix-ups ending up in the BFG, including "porteedo" for torpedo, "muggled" for confused and "swatchscollop" for disgusting food.

Solomon is no stranger to interacting with the public or the media, having set a world record at the London Marathon in 2010 for running while dressed as a doctor and a second world title in 2014 for the largest human image of an organ—the biggest brain—to mark the first World Encephalitis Day. His stunts always have a serious message though, whether it's through drawing attention to the dangers of encephalitis or his recent work on the battle to tackle Ebola in West Africa. He is now writing a book about Dahl's medical encounters and is seeking feedback from potential readers about the age-range at which it should be pitched.

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For more on **Tom Solomon and to sign up for his book** see <http://www.liv.ac.uk/roalddahl>

For more on the **Edinburgh International Science Festival** see <http://www.sciencefestival.co.uk>