

Death Won't Wait: Cancer Deaths Around Birthdays and Religious Holidays

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When it comes to certain long lasting and fatal illnesses, there is a widespread ›folk belief‹ in the hypothesis that persons are able to delay their own death for a brief period of time: A lot of people can tell anecdotes about relatives or close friends that died from such an illness, e. g. cancer, only a few days after their (round) birthday or important religious holidays, simply because they intensely wanted to live to see that specific event. Results both supporting and opposing this hypothesis of a ›intentionally delayed death‹ can be found in the recent literature, with many of the findings based on rather small and/or rather specific samples. In our research project we analysed more than four million cases of people who died from malignant neoplasms (cancer)—a cause of death being prototypical for the ›type of dying‹ meeting the above requirements and also being subject to several previous studies. In this data originating from the German causes of death statistics we found no evidence supporting the above hypothesis: neither for the population in general nor for specific religious, regional, or other sub-groups. In the poster on display, these results will be presented along with a detailed description of the project's methodological background.

Key Words: death statistics, cancer, death dates, holidays