Twitter Thread by Patrick Strudwick



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I'm deeply saddened to learn that Dr Joseph Sonnabend, one of the most important figures in the history of AIDS, died yesterday. I spent time with him in 2018 for one of the last interviews he ever gave. Let me tell you about this man and what he did:

Sonnabend was one of the first doctors to raise the alarm. In 1979, while running a sexual health clinic in Greenwich Village, he wrote to the NY Health Dept to warn them of the symptoms he was seeing: low white blood cell counts, enlarged lymph nodes. He didn't get a reply. 2/

So he kept speaking out. When a patient of his developed a very rare cancer – Kaposi's Sarcoma – he linked up with a dermatologist at NYU who said that over a dozen gay men had it. Sonnabend knew there was something very wrong. He started working at the lab at NYU — for free. 3/

It was soon after this in 1981 that the New York Times famously reported "Rare Cancer Found In 41 Homosexuals". The next decade would kill most of Sonnabend's patients and friends — and all of his lovers. What Sonnabend did was to fight for every single of them. 4/

Want to know who was the first to publish advice to wear a condom? That was Sonnabend. In 1983 he co-authored the first safe sex leaflet to fight AIDS: "How To Have Sex In An Epidemic". 5/

Also in 1983, he set up the AIDS Medical Foundation in a desperate search for treatment. Now called amFAR (American Foundation for Aids Research) it's one of the biggest HIV funding organisations in the world. 6/

Later, in 1987, he set up the first organisation to bring new drugs (that hadn't yet been approved) to people with AIDS: the PWA Health Group. It was soon copied by Ron Woodruff, who founded the Dallas Buyer's Club (made famous in the Hollywood movie). 7/

Sonnabend also fought for the rights of people with HIV. When the lease expired on his clinic, the co-op board who ran the building refused to renew it – they didn't want AIDS patients lowering the value. So Sonnabend sued them. He won. It was the first case of its kind. 8/

What he did next was one of the classiest fuck-yous of all time: the board offered him money to get out of the building — an amount that would reduce every month he stayed, in an attempt to hurry him out. So he refused to go, waited until the amount was zero, and THEN left. 9/

But Sonnabend was not flawless. He made some mistakes. He also made enemies, by opposing the drug AZT as he thought it wasn't yet properly tested for its use in HIV (he was right). He was slow to accept that HIV was the sole cause of AIDS, and was demonised for this. 10/

And in person, he was very no-nonsense. Uncompromising. He believed in facts and science, and in waiting until you have as much evidence as possible before concluding anything. The trouble was, during the worst of the AIDS pandemic, there was no time. 11/

In the time I spent with him, I was struck most by his love for his patients. He still kept tapes of their messages on his answer-machine from the 1980s. They were dying. He still kept a book with the names of all those he lost. He was traumatised. Spiky. Brilliant. 12/

It was as if the whole pandemic was buried in him, weighing him down, often bubbling up.

But he knew — because it was true — that he did everything he could.

In this, he was the best of us.

Rest now, Joe.

You've earned it.

❤■

Dr Joseph Sonnabend, 1933-2021.