

The Guardian

Bob Pape was a beloved father and foster carer. Did 'eat out to help out' cost him his life?

Sirin Kale

March 30, 2021

Last August, Pape and his family went on a city break to Birmingham, making the most of chancellor Rishi Sunak's discount scheme. The day after he arrived home, his symptoms began

Amanda Pape didn't want to go on a city break to Birmingham during a pandemic, but her husband, Bob, a 53-year-old lawyer, insisted. "Bob was convinced that the government would not allow people to travel if it wasn't safe," says Amanda, a 56-year-old former teacher. Bob was persuasive – he was a lawyer, after all – so she relented. Along with her daughter, Jazzy, 19, one of Jazzy's friends and a child Bob and Amanda were fostering, they booked three nights in a Holiday Inn from 2 August 2020.

The family, from Altrincham, Greater Manchester, stayed from Sunday to Wednesday, to make the most of the government's "eat out to help out" (EOTHO) scheme, which offered food and soft drink discounts on Mondays to Wednesdays in August. Right until they left for Birmingham, Amanda was uneasy. She was on the verge of cancelling. It felt wrong.

In the end, they had a wonderful time. They visited Cadbury World, where Bob got overexcited and bought too much chocolate at the gift shop. They ate at Five Guys, a Jamaican restaurant and a brewery. "Me and Amanda visited the local Brewdog for a pint," Bob wrote in his diary. "It was almost normal!" Most mornings, Bob fetched breakfast for everyone from McDonald's. Amanda would shove a bottle of hand sanitiser at him before he left and remind him to use it.

On their final night, they had dinner at Wetherspoon's with the kids. There was a bit of ugliness – a man at a nearby table was leering at Jazzy, so they moved seats. "I was concerned as some guys were getting lairy," Bob said in his diary. Bob took Amanda and their foster child back to the hotel before returning for the girls. It was just as well because Jazzy was a bit the worse for wear. Bob hauled her home and put her to bed.

Where did Bob contract Covid? From the touch-screen he used to place his McDonald's orders? At Five Guys, where they were careful to sit at a large table, away from everyone else? Amanda thinks about this now, late at night, running through all the places they visited on that weekend when everything was still right in the world and her partner of 11 years was by her side, smiling and carefree, and she thought this blasted pandemic was coming to an end.

Driving home, Amanda was in ebullient spirits. She was silly to have worried. They had had a great trip. Life was good.

There were two Bob Papes. If you had met the first, you would have seen a man dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, most likely with a beer in hand. He was cheerful, gregarious and loved to travel. Bob had no volume control and his constant wisecracking made some people wince. “His entire existence was about embarrassing me,” says Jazzy, a law student, with a sigh. “He wore Hawaiian shirts everywhere. And he was *so loud* when we were out. I would tell him to be quiet because people were looking.” Bob would look at you intently, make bad jokes, ask you questions about your life and really want to know the answers. “He collected people in the way some people collect bottles,” says Amanda. “He would talk to a stranger in a bar for hours.”

The second Bob was different. This was the lawyer who specialised in child support issues. He was respected and competitive. “If the judgment went his way, he’d say: ‘1-0,’ and wink,” remembers his friend and sometime legal adversary Mike Smith. But Bob preferred to keep his cases out of the tribunal courts, if possible, concerned for the welfare of the child. Most of the time, Bob would encourage his clients to come to an agreement out of the courtroom. If Smith was the opposing counsel, Bob would call him up and ask: how can we resolve this? It was better for the child that way. Less acrimony.

And woe betide a parent who was trying to hide their assets, to cheat their former partner out of child support. He would force them to come clean – even if they were his own client. “His big thing was fairness,” says Smith. “Just because you and your partner have separated doesn’t mean you can walk away from your responsibilities to the child. He was a great believer in that.”

Bob was born in Boston, Lincolnshire. His father was a telecoms engineer; his mother a homemaker. His childhood was wild and carefree. “They all had weird nicknames and would chuck themselves off bridges into the river and hope they didn’t break their necks,” says Amanda. At 16, Bob began temping in a law firm. He was not ambitious and lacked focus. “His first job had been collecting trolleys at the local supermarket, but he’d got fired from that for not paying attention,” says Amanda. “His dad wondered how long it would be before he got sacked from the law firm.”

Bob’s job there was to move boxes around and sort paperwork. On slow days, he would read the files. He started asking the lawyers about their cases. One of the senior partners at the firm began to take an interest in him. “He took Bob under his wing and said: ‘If you want to learn, I will teach you. I will pass on to you everything I know if you promise me that you’ll teach someone else one day,’” says Amanda. Bob founded his own firm, specialising in child support cases, in 1997.

When the senior partner died, he left Bob his wig in his will. On hearing this, Amanda says: “Bob started to cry. It meant the world to him. He used to say to me: ‘I’m a scrubber from Boston, just this awkward sod who never did well at school.’” He kept the wig in his office, on a Spitting Image puppet of Prince Edward. It seemed to represent the duality of Bob’s character: the lawyer atop the buffoon. “He would wind people up,” says Amanda. “He kept the puppet next to a picture of his son and people would come in, look at it and go: ‘I have to ask ...’ And Bob would say: ‘Is it about the photograph?’”

Amanda met Bob online in 2008. Both had separated from long-term partners and had children from previous relationships: Amanda has two boys as well as Jazzy, while Bob had a son. Their first date was at a bar in Manchester. Bob wore a Hawaiian shirt, of course. Amanda asked him if he had lost a bet and he said no, he just liked Hawaiian shirts. He told Amanda he was a

communist and she laughed and said: “How can you be a bloody communist when you’re a lawyer?” He said that he liked the idea of people sharing everything. “Bob and I just got each other,” says Amanda. “We were finishing each other’s sentences from the moment we met.”

Jazzy was six when Bob started dating her mum. At first, she gave him a hard time. “I would shun him,” she says. “He was always nice about it.” Later, they grew closer. Bob started teaching Jazzy about the law. “I’d come home from school and he’d give me a roundup of his cases and ask me how I would have approached them,” Jazzy says. Bob found in her a kindred spirit. “Sometimes he’d make an argument and I would see through it,” says Jazzy. “I would say: ‘You can’t bullshit a bullshitter!’ It made him laugh.” Before the pandemic hit, Jazzy was studying law at university. Bob was delighted with his protege. “He’d force Jazzy to put on the old wig,” says Amanda, “and say: ‘It’s your inheritance, girl!’”

Bob was not perfect. Besides the fart jokes – “He would grab your arm and let rip, so you couldn’t get away,” Amanda sighs – he had a temper. “If he wasn’t getting his own way, or was tired, we’d battle away,” says Amanda. “You’d see him out of the window, stomping around a field, talking to himself. Then he’d come back half an hour later, say he was sorry and give me a hug.”

From humble beginnings, this self-described “scrubber from Boston” had come good. “He’d sit in the garden with a beer at the end of a day’s work and say: ‘It’s a good life,’” says Amanda. Bob planned to train up Jazzy as a lawyer, then retire with Amanda and travel the world – and even further, if possible. “He signed us up for a one-way trip to Mars,” says Amanda. “I came home one day and he told me. I said: ‘It’s one way!’ He asked: ‘Where’s your sense of adventure?’”

Two Bobs, then. The serious, capable lawyer with integrity – and the life-of-the-party bon vivant in a Hawaiian shirt. Both Bobs died on the same day, 22 September 2020, at Wythenshawe hospital in Manchester. Amanda is certain that EOTH0 was to blame.

When the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced EOTH0 in a statement to parliament last summer, Covid cases were falling. Just 640 were reported in the UK on that day, 8 July. “I know people are cautious about going out, but we would not have lifted the restrictions if we did not think we could do so safely,” said a bullish Sunak, the second-youngest chancellor in history.

Sunak was the driving force behind EOTH0; promotional images for the initiative had his signature on them. He was riding high at the time, basking in approval ratings higher than those of the prime minister. A political unknown just six months previously, he was now beloved by the British public for turning on the spending taps. The government-funded scheme gave consumers 50% off the cost of food and soft drinks, up to a maximum discount of £10 a person, in participating businesses on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays in August. A total of 160m meals were claimed at 78,116 participating outlets that month, meaning that about 1.5 meals were claimed for each person in the UK.

Two days before Sunak’s announcement, Prof Lidia Morawska of Queensland University of Technology published an open letter, warning the World Health Organization (WHO) and national healthcare authorities of the dangers of airborne transmission of Covid. Her letter was signed by 239 scientists from around the world. “We are 100% sure about this,” Morawska said at the time, warning governments that 1- or 2-metre social distancing rules in indoor settings did

not protect people from infection via airborne Covid particles. “These rules are completely arbitrary,” Morawska says. “They just prevent people from inhaling very large particles. But very small particles, which come out of a person’s mouth or nose when they are speaking, can stay in the air for a very long time and go much further than 1 metre.”

These Covid-19 particles range in size from less than a micrometre up to 100 micrometres, roughly the width of a strand of human hair. Even an asymptomatic person can shed them simply by breathing and talking; people with Covid are the most infectious in the first week of infection, often before the onset of symptoms. In an indoor restaurant setting, particularly one with poor ventilation or reliant on air-conditioning, these particles may circulate freely in the air, infecting people at tables metres away from the infected person. “Imagine you’re in a restaurant with a smoking area,” says Morawska. “There’s no one smoking in the area you’re in. But you can still smell the smoke from the other area. In the same way, the virus can travel with this air flow.”

It is impossible to estimate how far airborne Covid particles can travel in an indoor setting. “They will travel as far as the airflow takes them,” says Morawska. “That may be metres or tens of metres.” UK government guidance requires that restaurants space tables at least one metre apart, with rules to mitigate risk, such as removing multiuse items including menus, mandating table service to avoid people clustering together at the bar, requiring face coverings when not eating or drinking and improving ventilation.

Han Liu of the University of Minnesota has modelled the transmission of Covid in restaurant settings. “Only keeping 6ft [1.8 metres] away from each other is not enough in some circumstances,” says Liu. He cites other factors, such as air-conditioning, ventilation and even the way body heat can cause air particles to rise and circulate. “All of these factors will create a complex flow pattern that will drive small droplets further than 6ft from a spot and infect other people.” Although Liu’s study was published in February 2021, he points me towards a paper published in July 2020 that examined a Covid outbreak in a restaurant in Guangzhou, China. It came to similar conclusions.

Did the government consult scientists before the introduction of the EOTH scheme? Speaking at an Institute for Government briefing in November 2020, Prof John Edmunds, a member of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said that Sage was not informed in advance about EOTH. The Treasury has never said if it sought advice from other, non-Sage-affiliated, scientists prior to the introduction of the scheme. In January 2021, the Labour MP Bridget Phillipson asked Sunak if he would publish a copy of the epidemiological advice he received before introducing EOTH. The Treasury minister Jesse Norman said the scheme was designed in “a safe and responsible manner”, but his department has failed to publish any advice.

Had the government consulted Sage or other scientists before the introduction of EOTH, they could have warned the chancellor about the risk of airborne transmission of the virus in indoor restaurant settings. The evidence was already there. “We knew this was a respiratory virus and we knew all along that it was transmitted by the air,” Morawska says. “If the government was telling people to eat out in restaurants in August, but didn’t do anything to protect people from airborne transmission, then it was just exposing people to the virus.”

The day after Morawska's open letter, the WHO publicly acknowledged the risk of airborne transmission of Covid. The day after that, Sunak stepped up to the dispatch box and announced the EOTHO policy. Afterwards, he travelled to a central London branch of the restaurant chain Wagamama. In front of photographers, a grinning chancellor served customers with his sleeves rolled up. He did not wear a mask.

On Thursday 6 August, Bob woke up feeling fine. He had a morning phone call with a client, then worked in his home office, by the Spitting Image bust, until noon. That was when his eyes started itching. Bob chalked it up to hay fever, but his appetite was also gone. All he could eat was toast. "I had a very unsettled night's sleep," Bob wrote in his diary.

The next day, Bob had a temperature. He attempted to work, but couldn't focus. He documented what happened next in his diary, which he kept as a draft in his emails. "Not eating ... constant stomach ache," he wrote. "Hot eyes. Constantly thirsty. Always exhausted." His final entry was uncharacteristically full of spelling and grammar mistakes. "At 5pm I ww e t downstairs to sit on the patio and enjoy the Cooling evening."

The family took Covid tests on 10 August: Amanda, Jazzy and Bob were all positive. (Amanda also started feeling unwell at about the same time Bob did, although her symptoms were less severe.) Amanda takes over the story, an unedifying farce. She called 111 on 11 August. "The person on the phone sounded about 12 and asked us what to do," she says. Amanda asked the operator to call an ambulance, but Bob started to feel better and told her to cancel it. The next day, Bob was delirious and collapsed in the garden. Amanda called 111 again and asked them to send an ambulance. The paramedics took Bob to Wythenshawe hospital. On 14 August, doctors discharged him. Amanda says: "He got into bed and I asked: 'What did they say to you?' He said: 'They said I will feel like death, but after a week, I'll be through it.'"

At home the next morning, Bob told Amanda that he felt worse than ever. Amanda called the hospital, who told her to call 111, who sent a doctor, who looked at Bob and told Amanda to call an ambulance if he didn't get better. It was a merry-go-round of care, each clinician passing off responsibility to the next clinician, leaving Amanda – still sick with Covid herself – to work out the best thing to do. "We were coming to day 10 of him being sick and they were saying: 'Just leave him be, he'll be fine,'" she says.

On 17 August, Bob deteriorated. "He kept gasping for air and saying: 'I can't breathe, I can't breathe,'" Amanda recalls. Hysterical, she called her GP, who listened to Bob's breathing on the phone and told her to call an ambulance. When the paramedics saw Bob, they turned white. Doctors from Wythenshawe hospital called Amanda two hours later. "The doctor said: 'I need you to understand how sick he is,'" Amanda remembers. "Something clicked inside me. I realised that I could be saying goodbye to my husband."

Before doctors put Bob on a ventilator, Amanda spoke to him on the phone. "He was crying," she says. "He said: 'I'm so sorry, I never should have taken us away.' He never cried. He told me that he loved the children and our life together so much. I'd never heard him so frightened. And I just knew. I told him not to worry. I said: 'You can beat this. You're going to be all right. I love you, too. I'm going to take care of the kids. We'll be all right.' I thought it would give him comfort, knowing that we would be OK. I put down the phone and I was just about certain he was going to die."

After speaking to her husband, Amanda made dinner for the kids. She called Bob's family, friends and clients and gave them the news that he had gone into hospital. At about 1am, she crawled into bed. "I fell apart," she says. "I was sobbing and biting the blanket. Because I didn't want to scare the kids." Exhausted and sick, Amanda slept uninterrupted for 12 hours.

The government has robustly defended EOTHO, even as the evidence against it has stacked up. In October 2020, the University of Warwick economist Thiemo Fetzer published a paper analysing the impact of EOTHO on Covid infections. Fetzer found that areas with higher take-up of the scheme saw an increase in Covid infection rates, with between 8% and 17% of new Covid infection clusters attributable to EOTHO. By drilling into rainfall figures and Google mobility data, Fetzer found that areas where it rained over lunch and dinnertime during August saw a drop in restaurant visits – and lower infection rates – compared with areas that had good weather. "Eat out to help out failed," he says. "It was a risk that was avoidable." The publication of Fetzer's paper created a stink. The Treasury rejected Fetzer's analysis without citing evidence.

Prof Jonathan Portes of King's College London is a former senior civil servant; he has held positions at the Treasury, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Cabinet Office. He stresses that Fetzer's research paper is not the last word on whether EOTHO did drive Covid infections up, but for the Treasury to cavalierly dismiss it was not appropriate – particularly as measures are now being considered to reopen the economy. "Thiemo is a serious economist," Portes says. "This is a serious piece of work. The Treasury can say it's not valid, but they haven't put any remotely credible analysis out there."

Fetzer tried for months to get hold of the evidence the Treasury was using to rebut his research. "We need to weigh the evidence and look at it," Fetzer says, sounding exasperated. "That's what economists do." Fetzer filed a freedom of information request, asking for a more detailed geographical breakdown of the data to improve his analysis. The government dragged its heels; the UK statistics regulator got involved, and reminded HMRC of its obligations to make such data available. "The government claimed to have done some analysis in-house, but it didn't release that analysis," Fetzer says. "It's hard to critique something that's not there."

Fetzer was not the only person to call out the error. Writing on ConservativeHome in September 2020, Ryan Bourne of the right-leaning thinktank the Cato Institute concluded that "EOTHO was a costly economic and public health mistake ... it is bizarre that Sunak has avoided more critical scrutiny of the policy". The Sage member John Edmunds described EOTHO as "epidemiologically illiterate". "What the Treasury seems to be saying – that people eating 160m meals indoors in the summer did not spread Covid – would seem to fly in the face of everything we have learned about how this virus passes from one person to another," says Tom Sasse of the Institute for Government.

One doctor said to me that Bob was as sick as the sickest person he'd ever seen on the ward

In January 2021, a Treasury spokesperson told the Sun's Harry Cole – a former partner of Carrie Symonds, the prime minister's girlfriend – that evidence had emerged proving there was no link between EOTHO and increased Covid infection rates. Although Cole did not cite this evidence in his article, the Treasury confirms that it was referring to statistics HMRC published in January 2021, cross-referenced with confirmed Covid cases. These figures "confirm that take-up of EOTHO does not correlate with incidence of Covid regionally – and indeed where it does the relationship is negative", the Treasury says.

Fetzer says the Treasury's analysis is misleading and needs to be broken down at a much more local level: "Aggregate data is not suitable for this type of analysis ... no serious researcher would conduct such an analysis at a regional level." The government refuses to disclose the detailed data, citing confidentiality concerns.

The government continues to circle the wagons around EOTHO and Sunak. "What the Treasury briefed to favoured journalists has the look of rather weakly trying to cover its tracks and limit damage to Sunak's brand," Sasse says. But in an October press conference, a fumbling Boris Johnson appeared to admit that EOTHO may have driven up Covid infection rates. "Insofar as that scheme may have helped to spread the virus, then obviously we need to counteract that," said Johnson.

Bob never made it off the ventilator. Amanda and the children visited as often as they could, always wearing Hawaiian shirts. (Bob's son had to shield because of a medical condition.) "You can't describe how horrible it feels to walk in and see the person you love, and you can't even hold them or hug them because you've got plastic on your hands and a mask on," Amanda says. Doctors explained to Amanda that Bob had multiple organ failure and was unlikely to pull through. "One doctor said to me that he was as sick as the sickest person he'd ever seen on the ward," says Amanda. "I have to applaud the doctors for their honesty. They never lied to me."

On the day he died, 22 September, Amanda and her children went to say goodbye. "The kids told Bob how much they loved him, and thanked him for all the trips to Disneyland and teaching them how to make proper sandcastles, and for supporting them all their lives," says Amanda. As they thanked him, Amanda noticed that a doctor hovering in the corner of the room was silently crying. The doctor asked the children if they wanted to leave before he switched off the ventilator. Bob was sedated and unconscious. "Jazzy told him that Bob had looked after her for all those years and of course she was going to hold his hand for his last moments," says Amanda. "He wasn't going to die alone. I was so proud of her."

Jazzy is traumatised by her decision to stay, but knows it was the right one. "He was there for all of us for our entire lives," she says. "To just abandon him when he was dying – I would never have forgiven myself. You want to be surrounded by the people you love when you pass. It wasn't an option not to be with him." Bob took a few minutes to die. "I was bawling my eyes out," Jazzy says. "It was a pain I don't imagine I will feel again. It felt like my entire life was slipping through my fingers and I just wanted to scream."

It has not been easy for Amanda to open up her life in this way. "I'm quite a private person," she says. "But Bob should not be dead. The government let him down. That's why I keep fighting. I'm mad as bloody hell." She believes he would want her to hold the government accountable for the initiative she believes killed him, EOTHO. "Many times we talked about doing the right thing and not letting the government get away with things," says Amanda, who is a Conservative voter. "You should be fair, but you should fight." Jazzy is also angry, saying of EOTHO: "It was such a neglectful thing to do ... we were at the home stretch. We were *there*. I will for ever regret going to Birmingham."

Was EOTHO worth it? In total, 160m meals were claimed in August, at a cost of £849m to the Treasury. "It accelerated our recovery, probably, by about two weeks and allowed us to bring almost two million people back off furlough," says Kate Nicholls, the CEO of UK Hospitality. But many of the restaurants that reopened in August were closed again within months as the UK

entered a second national lockdown and then a third. “The risk was simply too big and the cost was having to lock down the sector again quickly, and for a long period,” says Fetzer. Part of the reason that Fetzer has continued to push the government for data to analyse EOTHO is to prevent another super-spreading initiative in the future. “By understanding what made the scheme problematic, we can avoid making the same mistakes twice – especially if the UK government plans to repeat the scheme in future.”

At home, Amanda is tormented by silence. There is no Bob blaring Disney music or accosting her with fart jokes: “It seems so quiet now.” She tries to hold it together for her children, who also lost their father, to cancer. “Sometimes I go and sit in the car and cry, where no one can find me,” Amanda says. “Because I don’t want the children to see me going to pieces.” Every morning, she wakes up in an empty bed and for a moment it seems like a bad dream. “And then you remember,” she says. “And you have to go on with the new normal. I can’t describe what that feels like.”

Jazzy is taking a break from law school. “I can’t look at the law any more without seeing Bob,” she says. She hopes to complete her degree, in Bob’s honour. When she does, the old wig will be hers for the taking. An inheritance of curling horsehair and glue, from a lawyer unable to fill the promise he made to his mentor all those years ago. For now, it’s in the safekeeping of a wife who won’t stop fighting for justice, just as Bob would have done for any of them. When Jazzy graduates one day, it will be hers. Bob would be so sad he wasn’t there to see it.

This article was amended on 30 March 2021 to reinstate the description of Bob Pape’s mother as a homemaker, which was changed during the editing process.