Tazo Founder Steven Smith Dies of Liver Cancer

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Steven Smith, co-founder of the national tea chain Tazo, has died at age 65 from complications related to the hepatitis C virus (HCV) and liver cancer, Oregon Live reports.

Smith is credited with making Portland to tea what Seattle is to coffee, building up a globally renowned brand of specialty tea stores, which he ultimately sold to Starbucks. The entrepreneur also founded Stash Tea Co. and Steven Smith Teamaker, companies that are also credited with revolutionizing the modern tea industry.

Smith died of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), the most common form of liver cancer, which was caused by hep C. Smith's doctor believes he got the virus from a blood transfusion he received while he was traveling in India, seeking out exotic new teas for his company. Smith didn't find out about his infection until years later, while applying for health insurance at Tazo.

People with hep C have about a 4 percent chance of developing liver cancer in their lifetime. Smith was diagnosed with HCC in 2013, which had apparently spread and metastasized in his spine. Because of stigma, the entrepreneur did not tell many people about either his cancer or the fact that he was living with hep C.

Smith underwent radiation therapy soon after, and was planning to undergo hep C treatment if the cancer was successfully eradicated from his body. However, complications from spinal surgeries and liver cancer ultimately claimed his life.

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