

Focal Point

Felix Mendelssohn's family's brain condition

Like Mozart, the German musician Felix Mendelssohn was recognised early as a child prodigy, became popular as a young man, grew old quickly, and died young. He revealed the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach after almost a century of oblivion and was Goethe's favourite musician. Of a fragile constitution, Mendelssohn was a very friendly but rather introverted and sensitive person.¹ After the sudden death of his sister Fanny in May 1847, he began to show signs of clear depression, together with physical weakness and decrease in creativity.¹ In October 1847, he started to complain about sudden severe headache and probably had epileptic seizures. His condition deteriorated abruptly on Nov 3, 1847, when he suddenly screamed because he felt a terrible headache, dropped in his bed, and fainted. His alertness fluctuated, he showed slowed psychomotor responses, and finally became comatose hours before he died on Nov 4, 1847, at the age of 38 years.¹ The most plausible cause of his death is aneurysmal subarachnoid haemorrhage.¹⁻³ His sister had shown similar symptoms before her death at age 42 years. His grandfather Moses and both his parents had died from similar strokes. Although the primary evidence from the time is scarce, it points towards a possibility of familial cerebral aneurysms and subarachnoid haemorrhage, making the Mendelssohn family a rare and interesting, although speculative, medical and historical example. Even more speculative, but similarly intriguing, is the possible familial diagnosis of Ehlers-Danlos-Syndrome Type IV, which is inherited as an autosomal dominant trait. This syndrome occurs with arterial aneurysms, dissection or rupture of arterial vessels of large and medium diameter, together with characteristic facial features (acrogeria).⁴ The latter may be found in contemporary depictions of Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn.

Tomislav Breitenfeld, Drako Breitenfeld, Hansjörg Bänzner

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Lifeline

Sarah Pendlebury is an associate professor in the Centre for Prevention of Stroke and Dementia, Nuffield Department of Clinical Neurosciences, University of Oxford, and a consultant physician at the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Oxford (UK). She studies the cognitive effects of cerebrovascular events and acute illness; interactions between vascular disease, neurodegeneration, comorbidity, and delirium; and how routine cognitive assessment for older patients can be operationalised to drive better patient care.

What has been the greatest achievement of your career?

Keeping my research going, despite having three children, and remaining at the coalface in acute medicine. When I began my research career, there were few female clinical academics, particularly ones who had trained part time. I was lucky in obtaining a consultant post with funding for research from the National Institute for Health Research. To date, I am most proud of our work on the risks of dementia after transient ischaemic attack and stroke. The pain-staking use of multiple methods of follow-up enabled us to collect data on almost the whole population, avoiding the usual selection and attritional biases that are common in longitudinal studies, particularly in those including older patients.

If you had not entered your current profession, what would you have liked to do?

I originally obtained my place at Cambridge to study natural sciences. I was going to be a physicist like my father, who was a world authority on the neutron electric dipole moment.

What is your favourite book or film, and why?

It's difficult to choose a favourite film but I love Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in the West*. It has everything—a great story, cast, scenery, and a fantastic score by Ennio Morricone with memorable leitmotifs, especially for Charles Bronson's *Harmonica*.

What is your idea of a perfect day?

Hiking and staying overnight in rifugios in the Dolomites in northern Italy with my husband and our children, although they are all fitter and faster than me and I struggle to keep up.

What was your first experiment as a child?

I made an automatic recorder player to play the nursery rhyme *London's Burning* using light sensitive diodes and a vacuum cleaner in reverse. The science teacher said it was rather "Heath-Robinson" and not of any practical value, but I was quite proud of it.

What is the best piece of advice you have received?

From my husband, Peter Rothwell, "Research is a long game, stay focussed, and don't get distracted by short-term problems—almost anything useful takes at least 10 years to complete."



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