

Andrew Brooks, Who Developed a Coronavirus Spit Test, Dies at 51

His breakthrough helped millions get their results quickly in the early days of the pandemic, when tests were scarce and lines were long.



By Clay Risen

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Andrew Brooks, a research professor at Rutgers University who developed the first saliva test for the coronavirus, died on Jan. 23 in Manhattan. He was 51.

The cause was a heart attack, his sister, Janet Green, said.

In April 2020, when coronavirus tests were scarce and lines to get them long, Dr. Brooks made worldwide news when the Food and Drug Administration gave emergency approval to his technique, which promised to radically increase the speed and safety of the testing process.

“Instead of having a naso- or oropharyngeal swab that’s placed in your nose or the back of your throat, you simply have to spit in a tube,” he told Bill Hemmer of Fox News, adding, “It doesn’t require a health care worker to collect it, six inches away from an infected person.”

In the 10 months since Dr. Brooks received approval, health care workers have performed more than four million tests using his approach, and it remains one of the most reliable means of determining whether someone has the coronavirus.

In a statement, Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey called Dr. Brooks “one of the state’s unsung heroes” who had “undoubtedly saved lives.”

Andrew Ira Brooks was born on Feb. 10, 1969, in Bronxville, N.Y. His father, Perry H. Brooks, was a diamond setter. His mother, Phyllis (Heitner) Brooks, was a schoolteacher.

In addition to his sister, he is survived by his mother; his wife, Jil (Larsen) Brooks; and three daughters, Lauren, Hannah and Danielle. His first two marriages ended in divorce.

Dr. Brooks grew up in Old Bridge, N.J., where he earned spending money by performing magic shows at birthday parties. Though he was adept at tricks involving doves and rabbits, his real forte was close-up handwork, especially card tricks.

He played varsity golf at Cornell, where he majored in animal sciences, having initially planned to become a veterinarian. But after a summer internship at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, he grew fascinated with the study of human disease. He received a doctorate in microbiology and immunology from the University of Rochester in 2000.

After working at the university's medical center for four years, he returned to New Jersey to take a job at Rutgers, and in 2009 joined its Cell and DNA Repository, a university-owned company that provides data management and analysis for biological research.

Dr. Brooks became the company's chief operating officer, discovering that he had a flair for the business side of science. He expanded the company from just a few dozen employees to nearly 250, working with nearly every major pharmaceutical company.

"Most scientists I meet are not interested, or are incidentally interested, in the commercialization of what they do," said Dr. Jay Tischfield, a Rutgers professor and chief executive of the repository. "Andy understood that if you want something to get out and be used, you have to be a player. You can't rely on other people."

In 2018 the company, by then called the Rutgers University Cell and DNA Repository Infinite Biologics, decided to go private; Dr. Brooks was named chief executive. The university agreed with the move but kept a significant stake in the new company, now called Infinity Biologix.

The resources and experience he accrued at the repository made it relatively easy for Dr. Brooks to develop the coronavirus spit test, which he did in partnership with two other companies, Spectrum Solutions and Accurate Diagnostics Labs.

He was used to doing genetic testing through saliva, and "it wasn't rocket science," Dr. Tischfield said, to adapt those techniques to extract RNA from the coronavirus. The company even had thousands of tubes on hand that it could use to collect samples.

After the F.D.A. granted approval, Dr. Brooks faced a different challenge: scale. He needed significantly more equipment and staff, immediately, to produce the tests and process the results. But a propitious call from the White House offering help, and a multimillion-dollar loan arranged by Dr. Tischfield allowed the company to add additional analytic equipment rapidly and to nearly double its work force almost overnight.

As important as the actual saliva test was, it was Dr. Brooks's ability to rapidly scale up the operation — in the middle of taking it private — that most impressed Dr. Tischfield.

"I've been doing this for 50 years, and I've met all kinds of people," he said. "But Andy, he was a force of nature."

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