

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

DAVID A. BRENNER

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of Interviews
Conducted by

Richard C. Sawyer, Arnold Thackray, and Hilary Domush

at

University of California, San Diego
San Diego, California

on

20 June 1990 and 10 and 11 March 2009

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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DAVID A. BRENNER

1953 Born in Queens, New York on 28 April

Education

1975 B.S., Biology, Yale University
1979 M.D., Yale University School of Medicine

Professional Experience

1979-1982 Yale-New Haven Medical Center
Resident, Department of Internal Medicine

1982-1985 National Institute of Arthritis, Diabetes, and Digestive and Kidney
Diseases, National Institutes of Health
Medical Staff Fellow Research Associate, Genetics and
Biochemistry Branch

1985-1986 University of California, San Diego
Gastroenterology Fellow

1986-1990 Assistant Professor of Medicine in Residence

1990-1992 Associate Professor of Medicine

2007-present Vice Chancellor for Health Sciences and Dean, University of
California, San Diego, School of Medicine

2007-present Dean, University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine

1987-1992 Veterans Administration Medical Center, San Diego, California
Staff Physician

1988-1989 Acting Assistant Chief of Medicine

1992 Clinical Investigator

1993-2000 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Professor, Medicine and Biochemistry and Biophysics

1993-2000 Chief, Division of Digestive Diseases and Nutrition

2000-2003 Nina C. and John T. Sessions Distinguished Professor of
Digestive Diseases and Nutrition

2001-2006 Editor-in-Chief, *Gastroenterology*

2002-2003 Director, University of North Carolina Center for Digestive
Diseases and Nutrition

Center for Gastrointestinal Biology and Disease, University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University
1994-2000 Co-Director

Columbia University
2003-2007 Samuel Bard Professor and Chairman, Department of Medicine
2003-2008 Member, Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center,
Experimental Therapeutics, Gastrointestinal Cancer
2003-2007 Member, Columbia University Institute of Nutrition

Honors

1979 Harry S.N. Greene Prize for Outstanding Thesis
1986-1989 American Gastroenterological Association/Sandoz Research Award
1986-1990 Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences
1989 Chief Medical Resident's Teaching Award
1998-1999 Kenan Fellow

ABSTRACT

David A. Brenner grew up in Queens, New York, the oldest of three children. His father worked in the family business, a ladies' clothing store; his mother was a housewife until her children were grown, at which time she went into real estate. Brenner was bar mitzvah, but he had no attraction to religion. He was always interested in the sciences.

For Brenner the sciences meant medicine, and he chose Yale University as a good school for biology. He found chemistry static and dull, but biology was burgeoning. After his junior year, Brenner spent a year on a research ship, working for Edward Thorndike of the Lamont Geological Observatory, and becoming interested in marine biology. Back at Yale he reverted to biology, working in Joseph Bloomer's lab and winning an award for his outstanding thesis.

Only two medical schools required a thesis of students, and wanting to continue to do research, Brenner chose Yale. He continued working in Bloomer's lab, studying protoporphyria in the Liver Study Unit. He took his two years of classes and then went back to the lab. He worked on variegate porphyria, writing a thesis that was published in *New England Journal of Medicine*. Brenner and his wife, who had also been a medical student at Yale, then went to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for three years. He wanted to learn molecular biology, so he spent three years in Daniel Camerini-Otero's lab, while his wife did rheumatology.

Brenner next took a job at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). He worked for a year in clinical gastroenterology on liver diseases. He set up his lab and began his study of ferrochelatase. Mario Chojkier persuaded Brenner to join his molecular biology knowledge with Chojkier's biochemical knowledge in a study of collagen. Brenner also joined the staff of the Veterans Administration Medical Center.

At the end of the 1990 interview, Brenner explains his title and its connection to tenure; his lab management style; competition and collaboration; and his winning of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences award.

He starts the 2009 interview by reviewing his early years in college and affirming his career decisions. He expresses joy in the richness of biology; he appreciates the insights his clinical experience gives him in his research. He also reminisces about his long lab hours and his residency. He remembers life in the NIH labs and discusses moonlighting to keep up his clinical skills while he did his postdoc. And he talks about the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences award and the Pew annual meetings.

After several years Brenner moved to the University of North Carolina (UNC), becoming a full professor and continuing his work on ferrochelatase and fibrosis in cirrhosis. He was named director of the university's Center for Digestive Diseases and Nutrition and became Editor-in-Chief of *Gastroenterology*. He commanded more lab space and more equipment. He found UNC's intellectual approach similar to those of UCSD and Yale. North Carolina, furthermore, had a welcoming lab community and was a good place to establish his family life (and, as Brenner notes, there was also Atlantic Coast Conference basketball, and the sky was always Carolina blue). His children had time to grow up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, before Brenner moved to Columbia University, where he became Samuel Bard Professor and Chairman of the Department of Medicine. After his five years as Editor of *Gastroenterology* Brenner was lured back to San Diego; there he became Vice Chairman for Health Services and Dean.

At the end of the interview he talks about various universities; his administrative duties; and his lack of time for the lab. He explains his hope to affiliate the children's hospital to the UCSD system, tells some visa stories about his foreign postdocs, and talks more about grant writing and his grants. He laughs when asked how he has balanced his home life and work life, saying he never did balance them and mentions that his children are now grown, his daughter in medical school at Columbia, and his son, a graduate of University of Georgia, in business. They all get together, however, at the Atlantic Coast Conference basketball championships, of course rooting for the Tar Heels.

INTERVIEWERS

Richard C. Sawyer attended the University of California, Riverside, from which he received a B.S. in biology. He entered the University of Wisconsin, where he earned his Ph.D. in history of science. After a postdoctoral year at the University of Pennsylvania, he changed careers, now teaching high school biology and mathematics.

Arnold Thackray founded the Chemical Heritage Foundation and served the organization as president for 25 years. He is currently CHF's chancellor. Thackray received M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in the history of science from Cambridge University. He has held appointments at Cambridge, Oxford University, and Harvard University, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1983 Thackray received the Dexter Award from the American Chemical Society for outstanding contributions to the history of chemistry. He served for more than a quarter century on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, where he was the founding chairman of the Department of History and Sociology of Science and is currently the Joseph Priestley Professor Emeritus.

Hilary Domush earned a B.S. in chemistry from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine in 2003. Since then she has completed a M.S. in chemistry and a M.A. in history of science both from the University of Wisconsin. Her graduate work in the history of science focused on early nineteenth-century chemistry in the city of Edinburgh, while her work in the chemistry was in a total synthesis laboratory. Hilary is currently Program Associate for Oral History at CHF, where she combines these two divergent academic paths. Her current work focuses on the Pew Biomedical Scholars and Women in Chemistry oral history projects. She also contributes to the podcast *Distillations* and the magazine *Chemical Heritage*.

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