

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**EMMA R. PARMEE**

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Hilary L. Domush

at

Merck and Co.  
West Point, Pennsylvania

on

30 and 31 January 2012

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION  
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## EMMA R. PARMEE

1965 Born in Keynsham, United Kingdom

### Education

1983 The Maynard High School for Girls, Exeter, UK  
1987 BA, Exeter College, Oxford University, Honors Chemistry  
1990 DPhil, Linacre College, Oxford University, Organic chemistry

### Professional Experience

1990-1992 Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
NATO Postdoctoral Fellowship

Merck & Co.

1992-1995 Senior Research Chemist  
1995-2000 Research Fellow  
2000-2004 Senior Research Fellow  
2004-2008 Director, Medicinal Chemistry  
2008-2010 Senior Director, Medicinal Chemistry  
2010-2013 Executive Director, Discovery Chemistry Site Head  
2013-present Associate Vice President, Head of Exploratory Chemistry

### Honors

2007 Thomas Alva Edison Patent Award from the R&D Council of NJ  
2007 Member of team awarded Prix Galien USA for JANUVIA™  
2009 SCI Gordon E. Moore Medal for Innovation  
2010 YWCA Central New Jersey, Tribute to Women and Industry Honoree

## ABSTRACT

**Emma Parmee** grew up in Keynsham, England, the youngest of four children. Her father was a banker, her mother a housewife. She had always liked math and science, but she also liked languages. She attended all-girls schools, and, beginning to like chemistry in high school, she entered Exeter College at the University of Oxford. The system was rigorous and structured; Eric Thomas was her organic chemistry tutor and became her advisor for her PhD. Parmee's publication on milbemycin E was awarded the prize for best dissertation in that year.

From Oxford Parmee went to a postdoctoral position in Satoru Masamune's lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); there she grew more interested in synthesis than in process. After a year in that lab she began her job hunt. She was recruited by Merck & Co. to work in Rahway, New Jersey, on Ann Weber's medicinal chemistry team. Parmee worked on obesity projects, helping develop L507. She met her husband at Merck and made the decision to stay in the United States. She describes the process of discovery and development of a compound, and explains the evolution of the corresponding work teams. Moving more into team leadership and management, she ran a group of six while also working on smaller projects. She is credited with being instrumental in the discovery of sitagliptin, trademarked JANUVIA, which is used to treat diabetes.

Parmee was able to continue her regular work while helping oversee and organize the merger with Schering-Plough and was named Executive Director, Discovery Chemistry Site Head. This necessitated moving the whole family to West Point, Pennsylvania. She maintains that balancing family life with her extraordinary career has been possible only because her husband shares family duties and because Merck is so flexible. After the move to Pennsylvania Parmee switched fields from metabolic and cardiovascular disorders to neuroscience and infectious disease.

Parmee discusses globalization and Merck's various sites. She praises Merck's emphasis on teamwork and collaboration. She talks about her views of science education and the public's skewed perceptions of drug companies. She says women are still underrepresented in upper levels of management in drug companies but that things are improving. No longer at the bench, she takes her satisfaction in teaching and helping others. She is proud of her three compounds that went to proof of concept in man:  $\beta$ -agonist, glucagon, DPP-4 (sitagliptin). Her advice to new researchers: do what you love.

## INTERVIEWER

**Hilary Domush** was a Program Associate in the Center for Oral History at CHF from 2007-2015. Previously, she earned a BS in chemistry from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine in 2003. She then completed an MS in chemistry and an MA in history of science both from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. 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. At CHF, she worked on projects such as the Pew Biomedical Scholars, Women in Chemistry, Atmospheric Science, and Catalysis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Early Years	1
<p>Grows up in Keynsham, England. Family background. Enjoys math, sciences, and language classes. All-girls schools. Chemistry in high school.</p>	
College and Graduate School Years	6
<p>Attends Oxford for chemistry. Entrance process; accepted at Exeter College. College experiences; teaching system rigorous, structured, time-consuming. Eric Thomas for organic chemistry tutor and advisor. Part II degree; women in department. Lab composition, management, atmosphere. Move to Manchester, England. Work on milbemycins; PhD from Oxford despite lab's move. Government subsidies of university. Publication of milbemycin E awarded best dissertation in that year. Learning to write and evaluate papers.</p>	
Postgraduate Years	36
<p>Enters Satoru Masamune's lab at MIT. Moving to United States. Lab composition, management style. Getting results; growing more interested in synthesis than process. Writing with Masamune.</p>	
Job Seeking	43
<p>One year in Masamune's lab. Academics versus industry: salary, grant-writing. Recruited by Merck &amp; Co. Interest in medicinal chemistry. Importance of connections, credentials. Working as member of Ann Weber's project team. Develops L507 and works on obesity project; teamwork on all projects. Meets husband at Merck.</p>	
Medicinal Chemistry	53
<p>Medicinal chemistry different from synthetic; learning biochemistry. Moving more into management. Evolution of teams with progress of compound. Process of discovery and development. Running group of six; smaller project also. Joining large team; developing DPP-4, which led to sitagliptin (JANUVIA). Driven by data and biology. Birth of daughter. Leave's Weber's group. Satisfaction from teaching, helping others. Women in lower levels, fewer in upper levels. Work-life balance. Merck's flexibility. Importance of collaboration.</p>	
Moving to Pennsylvania	64
<p>Her role in merger with Schering-Plough. Working with new people, organizing, and meeting deadlines, in addition to directing medicinal chemistry. Named Executive Director, Discovery Chemistry Site Head at West Point, Pennsylvania. Moving whole family. Change from metabolic and cardiovascular disorders to neuroscience and infectious disease. Globalization of drug sector. Merck's various sites.</p>	

General Thoughts	87
<p>Views of science education; performing experiments at schools. Public's skewed perceptions of big pharma. Better communications needed. Awards. Glucagon her first project as group leader finally worked better than expected. Three compounds or projects went to proof of concept in man: <math>\beta</math>3-agonists, glucagon, DPP-4 (sitagliptin). Many patents, fewer publications. Advice to new researchers: do what you love.</p>	
Index	97

## INDEX

### A

ACS. *See* American Chemical Society  
American Chemical Society, 42, 43, 92  
American Diabetes Association, 92  
Anderson, Paul S., 44  
Annie (daughter), 62, 65, 67, 70, 88

### B

Baldwin, Sir Jack E., 18, 30  
Bath, England, 1, 16  
boceprevir, 89  
Boston, Massachusetts, 39, 85  
Bristol, England, 1, 5

### C

*Chemical Communications*, 37  
China, 81, 83, 84, 85  
collaboration, 50, 70, 71, 72, 79, 93, 94  
competition, 8, 20, 21, 50

### D

DPP-4, 60, 61, 91, 92, 93

### E

Edinburgh, Scotland, 82  
England, 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 14, 15, 18, 20, 28, 29, 31, 39, 42, 44,  
45, 46, 50, 80, 81, 82, 85

### F

Fisher, Michael H., 47

### G

Glaxo, Inc., 44, 45  
glucagon, 62, 79, 92, 93  
grants/funding, 25, 43

### I

Imperial College London, 15  
Italy, 80, 81

### J

JANUVIA [sitagliptin], 61, 89, 91  
*Journal of the American Chemical Society*, 42

### K

Kenilworth, New Jersey, 73, 80  
Keynsham, England, 1  
Kim, Peter, 73, 89

### L

L507, 48  
L-507, 49  
L-507, 50  
London, England, 1, 15, 30

### M

Manchester, England, 25, 29, 31, 32, 33, 38, 40  
Masamune, Satoru, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 85  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 28, 37, 38, 44, 45  
medicinal chemistry, 41, 44, 45, 47, 48, 52, 54, 55, 57, 63,  
70, 84, 95  
Merck & Co., 1, 27, 43, 44, 45, 50, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 59,  
64, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 84,  
85, 87, 89, 94  
Merck Frosst Centre for Therapeutic Research, 80, 84  
milbemycins, 25, 31, 33, 36, 43, 61  
milbemycin E, 33, 37  
MIT. *See* Massachusetts Institute of Technology

### N

NATO Postdoctoral Fellowship, 38, 39, *See* NATO  
Postdoctoral Fellowship

### P

Parmee, Ben (brother), 4  
Parmee, Bridget (sister), 4  
Parmee, Richard (brother), 3, 4, 7, 11  
patents, 57, 61, 94  
Pattenden, Gerald, 26  
pharmacokinetics, 53, 73  
PK. *See* pharmacokinetics  
publish/publication, 34, 36, 42, 58, 94

### R

Rahway, New Jersey, 44, 45, 46, 47, 64, 70, 74, 75, 77, 78,  
79, 80, 85, 86

### S

Scotland, 17, 81, 82  
Sinclair, Paul (son), 87  
Sinclair, Pete (husband), 76  
sitagliptin [JANUVIA], 61, 91, 92, 93  
Steel, Patrick G., 25



## T

Terlings Park, England, 44  
Thomas, Eric J., 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31,  
32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 45, 49

## U

U.K. *See* United Kingdom  
United Kingdom, 44, 45, 85  
United States of America, 1, 2, 4, 7, 18, 28, 29, 38, 39, 44,  
45, 46, 65, 82, 83  
University of Cambridge, 3, 6, 10, 11  
University of Nottingham, 15, 26  
University of Oxford, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 26,  
28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38, 45  
Exeter College, 12, 17, 22, 23

## V

Vioxx, 80, 89

## W

Weber, Ann, 47, 49, 52, 57, 60, 63, 71  
West Point, Pennsylvania, 1, 44, 45, 52, 64, 65, 75, 77, 79,  
80, 81  
Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, 80  
Wittig reaction, 18, 34  
World War II, 5, 6

## B

$\beta$ 3-agonists, 48, 49, 58, 60, 93