

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

JOHN D. ALTMAN

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Karen A. Frenkel

at

Emory Vaccine Center in the Yerkes Regional Primate Center, Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia

on

30 and 31 January and 1 February 2006

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Professional Experience

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Postdoctoral Fellow, with Dr. Mark Davis

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Honors

1980 University of Michigan Regents Scholarship

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Selected Publications

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ABSTRACT

John D. Altman was born and raised in Birmingham, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. He and his sister, two years younger, attended public schools, where, without parental prodding (or so he remembers), both were good students. He had an inspiring literature class in high school but remembers no inspirational classes in the sciences. His family belonged to a Hebrewless temple where the rabbi had established the Society for Humanistic Judaism; Altman was bar mitzvah there in an unusual ceremony.

Altman had planned to attend medical school after obtaining an electrical engineering degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after which he would work on medically related things, but by what he calls incremental steps he reverted to biology. Soon after beginning college he switched majors to chemistry, working in Michael Marletta's toxicology laboratory throughout his college career. Extracurricular activities included fishing in Gloucester, biking, and playing intramural hockey on his fraternity's team.

During his junior year he realized that he wanted to go into research, not medicine, and he decided to attend the University of California, San Francisco, for graduate school; his two influences for this decision were Marletta and Gregory Petsko. At the University of California, San Francisco, his doctoral research in Irwin Kuntz's biophysical chemistry laboratory involved using two-dimensional nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy to study protein structure.

Altman then discusses his experiences and project with Steve Anderson at Genentech Corporation during his postdoctoral fellowship in Mark Davis's immunology laboratory at Stanford University. At Stanford he meets and marries his wife. Altman continues with a discussion of his postdoctoral research on protein chemistry and immunology with T cells in the Davis laboratory; his collaborations with Oxford University studying T cells and HIV immunity; his defining moment at Oxford; and meeting Rafi Ahmed.

Altman accepted a position at the Vaccine Center of Emory University and set up his lab. Altman then delves into his funding history. He explains his administrative roles at the Emory Vaccine Center and the MHC Tetramer Core Facility; he talks about his collaborations, his current research in viral immunology, and his direction of the Immunology Core Laboratory in the Vaccine Center. He explains the funding at the MHC Tetramer Core Facility and discusses his patent and his research on vaccines at the Southeastern Regional Center for Excellence in Biodefense.

Altman describes his lab management style and the makeup of his lab and discusses how he would like to set the national science agenda. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon the wider context of his work, the impact of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences grant on his work, the grant-writing process, and the issues of patents, politics, religion, and ethical questions in science.

UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Karen A. Frenkel, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.A., Hampshire College, 1978; M.S., Boston University, 1982

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: John Altman's office at Emory Vaccine Center in the Yerkes Regional Primate Center, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

Date: January 30, 31, and February 1, 2006.

Total number of recorded hours: 6

Persons present during interview: Altman and Frenkel.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts' Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Frenkel held a telephone pre-interview conversation with Altman to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. She also reviewed the documentation in Altman's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including his proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members.

ORIGINAL EDITING:

Carol Squires edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Altman did not review the transcript. Consequently, some proper names and other information remain unverified.

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