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The “Best Alarm Clock” of Dr. Harvey J. Alter’s life

In continuation to my endeavour to bring to you some small interesting and funny incidents of the lives of the Nobel laureates, today I would like to shed some light on the eventful life of Dr. Harvey J. Alter, who was awarded Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in the year 2020 for discovery of the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV).

Dr. Alter was born on 12th September, 1935 in the New York City in a Jewish family. He graduated from the University of Rochester in 1956 and obtained a Medical degree from the same university in the year 1960. After undergoing residency for a brief period, he joined the National Institute of Health (NIH), Bethesda as a Clinical Associate and stayed there until June 1964. Then he went to the University of Washington, School of Medicine, Seattle, Washington for another year of residency. Meanwhile, he obtained a medical licence from the District of Columbia and worked as the Director, Haematology Research at Georgetown University Hospital from July 1966 to June 1969. Dr. Alter joined NIH as the Chief of Infectious Diseases in the year 1972 and is still working there in the same position.

In 1960s and 70s, there were outbreaks of an unknown hepatitis in some patients with the history of blood transfusion and there was no clue about the aetiology of this disease. So, the disease was named as Transfusion Associated Hepatitis (TAH). A young investor of that time, Dr. Alter got interested in the disease and wanted to do something for solving the problem of this unknown hepatitis. As an expert of infectious diseases in NIH, he started following the patients of this new hepatitis and started working on it. After years of tireless efforts, Dr. Alter and his team could experimentally reproduce the disease in chimpanzee by inoculating blood of infected patients and later, this led to the discovery of a new virus as a cause of hepatitis in the year 1989. As this virus was another in addition to Hepatitis A and B viruses causing hepatitis in man, it was finally named as Hepatitis C Virus (HCV).

The incident I am mentioning here occurred at the time of revealing to Dr. Alter the news of the Nobel Prize being awarded to him. For this, he got a very early morning call from Stockholm at around 4.45 am. The phone in his home kept on ringing and naturally there was nobody to attend it at

that odd hour. Dr. Alter was sleeping in the nearby room and was woken up by the long rings. However, he remained on the bed hoping that it would stop. Soon after the first call got disconnected, it started ringing again making Dr. Alter very angry. He got up, rushed and reached the phone in a rage to teach the man on the other end of the phone a lesson for making desperate calls at that odd hour of the day. But as soon as he picked up the phone and got the unexpected good news, he rushed to his wife to wake her up and disclose the news. Later in an interview, Dr. Alter referred that special phone call as the “Best alarm clock he ever had”.

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