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An interview by Dr. Ernesto Carafoli with, Editor-in-Chief of *Biochemical and Biophysical Research Communications* (BBRC), Dr. William Lennarz

1. Can you remember your first experience with the field of science?

I was always interested in both Biology and Chemistry. I got started in Chemistry as a young boy when I first assembled a chemistry set in the basement of my parent's house. However, I was driven out of the basement and my mother was driven out of the kitchen when I prepared H₂S. I knew that was the beginning of a long career in science.

2. What shaped your decision to choose Biochemistry, and how did you end up at the Laboratory of Konrad Bloch?

Because I was interested in both Chemistry and Biology it became clear that Biochemistry was a good combination. It was not my decision to join the laboratory of Konrad Bloch. That was decided for me by a couple of letters written by professors from the University of Illinois. I had no input and wrote no letter of request. I was simply informed that I was going to Konrad's lab at Harvard. At the time I didn't realize how unusual that was.

3. What can you say about the general atmosphere in science at the beginning of your career? How does it differ from today's atmosphere?

At beginning of my career the general atmosphere in science was very favorable to basic research. There was considerable funding for good people and a great choice of labs. Today there is less focus on basic research and more on applied research and engineering.

4. What motivated you to move from lipid biochemistry to glycobiology? It was a clairvoyant choice, but not an obvious one at the time you made it

My move from lipid biochemistry to glycobiology was the result of my interest in lipids. In particular, I became interested in glycosylated lipids. There was no such thing as glycobiology and because of my interest in lipids I sort of stumbled into glycolipids.

5. At Johns Hopkins, where you spent your first years as an Assistant Professor, you were introduced to a department populated by a community of illustrious bioenergeticists that was dominated by the eminent Al Lehninger. How did this environment help shape your career?

Johns Hopkins was the beginning of my independent career and it was somewhat surprising that the department was so dominated

by Albert Lehninger who was involved in writing his textbook and had little time, and even less interest, in guiding the junior faculty. Fortunately, a short time later Ed Heath was hired as an Associate Professor and he really became my mentor and my good friend. Subsequently, he moved to the University of Pittsburgh and then the University of Iowa as Chair. Regrettably, he died of cancer at the age of 55. But I will always remember Ed as an integral part of my early career at Johns Hopkins.

6. Faculty at Johns Hopkins tend to remain in their positions for a long time but you left the University for a move to first Texas then Stony Brook, after a relatively short stint. What motivated you to leave Johns Hopkins?

It is true that most of the Hopkins' faculty remained there for many years but I moved after a few years to Houston, Texas to become Chair of the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and then to Stony Brook University as Chair of the Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology. The only reason that I moved was that Dan Lane had been appointed Chair of the Department of Physiological Chemistry, so that avenue was no longer open to me. Initially, I was quite comfortable with that idea, but was then lured away to Houston because at that time there were immense recruiting resources because the price of oil was very high. While I was there, I recruited a number of very good faculty members; some of whom are still there and are still very active in research. One of them, Dan Carson, is in fact, now Dean at Rice University and his wife, Cindy, is Vice President of Research.

7. The other major topic of your research is fertilization. How did you decide on this topic?

Another area of my interest in glycosylation relates to the process of fertilization. I studied the role of carbohydrate chains in fertilization, first in the sea urchin, and then briefly in the frog.

8. You have been a very successful scientist; if you look back, is there anything that you would do differently if you had to do it over again?

I am very happy to have worked in these areas and there is very little that I would have done differently. Perhaps, however, I could have moved into utilization of the techniques of molecular biology sooner, but initially I was intimidated by it. After all, I was trained as a real chemist!

9. Most scientists like us have figures they regard very highly; figures who have shaped the way we think about and approach the field of science. Who are some of these figures for you in your career as a scientist?

When I look back now and think of my role models among prominent figures they were, of course, Konrad Bloch and Eugene Kennedy. Both of these people were extremely successful scientists and I was happy to have had the opportunity to interact with them on numerous occasions.

However, I was only one of many postdocs that they interacted with and I can't say that I was really close to either. However, as time passed, I did become close to Konrad. I suppose this happened because he decided that I was doing reasonably well as an independent scientist. Times have really changed with respect to such interactions. Now they are far less formal.

10. Aside from your career as a professor and scientist you have also been heavily involved with the editorial side of science, most recently as Editor-in-Chief of *Biochemical and Biophysical Research Communications* (BBRC), a role you've had since 1985. What do you think of the role of BBRC, and science journals in general, in the development and progress of science?

With respect to journals, specifically BBRC, over the years I have tried to upgrade the quality of papers accepted by BBRC with the hope that they would enhance the overall perception of the journal

and facilitate a broader readership. For the most part, I think that I have been successful. By improving the quality of published papers in BBRC I have had a part in improving the field in general and this is the role journals should play in science.

11. What advice would you give to a young student looking for an important and emerging field of study in Biochemistry?

With regard to advising future students on what direction to take in science, I guess I would have to tell them that the molecular aspects of genetics would be the direction to go in their career. I think the most exciting problems for the future are the development of techniques that will facilitate a more detailed understanding of how the products of genes function at the biochemical level. After all, I am a biochemist!

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