

Laura Piddock

Fights antibiotic resistance



PETER LOCKE

LAURA PIDDOCK, 55, professor of microbiology at the University of Birmingham, researches the ways in which bacteria become resistant to antibiotics. She leads Antibiotic Action, a global initiative that urges major investment by countries and companies to find new treatments for bacterial infections before resistance to existing infections makes simple injuries a life threatening experience and operations such as hip replacements too hazardous to undertake. Her research focuses on bacterial efflux pumps, the transporter mechanisms used by cells to spit out antibiotics, and the biological effects of acquiring resistance.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

“The polymerase chain reaction. The ability to make many copies of pieces of DNA has revolutionised biology. It allows us to carry out experiments to determine what bacterial genes do and to make specific mutations and determine their effect”

What was your earliest ambition?

To be a ballerina. It was only when I didn't get offered a place at the Royal Ballet School at age 11 that I looked at alternatives. I then decided to become a graphic designer, but my parents were unhappy with that career choice and at age 18 ushered me into science instead.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Staying in Birmingham. Early in my career this hindered me, but for family reasons I had no choice. Ultimately, though, this turned out to be a very good decision.

What was your best career move?

Working with Professor Richard Wise at Dudley Road (now City) Hospital, Birmingham.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

I believe Andrew Lansley has been the worst, as he established privatisation by stealth of the NHS. It will be extremely difficult if not impossible to reverse the changes that he put in place.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

John Barrett, who nominated me for the Bristol-Myers Squibb unrestricted grant in infectious diseases that I was awarded in 2001. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the outcome of the research I did with this funding. It allowed me to carry out research that would not have been funded through conventional means and led to me being promoted to professor at the age of 41.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Reading a novel all Saturday morning in bed.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

Appointing bright, passionate scientists to work on antibiotic resistance.

Where are or were you happiest?

Many things make me happy: from getting a paper accepted for publication to getting a grant funded. However, spending time with my husband and children is extremely important, and my happiest memories are always of times with them on a warm sunny beach.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

The polymerase chain reaction. The ability to make many copies of pieces of DNA has revolutionised biology. It allows us to carry out experiments to determine what bacterial genes do and to make specific mutations and determine their effect.

Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

Until we are able to manage pain completely or prevent people being trapped in their bodies unable to move, yes, I do, in circumstances where people request it and there are appropriate safeguards. I find it very strange that we euthanise our pets when they are extremely old or ill and in great pain but that we do not offer the same to people.

What book should every doctor read?

Bad Science by Ben Goldacre should be essential reading for every doctor and scientist, as it reveals how science and statistics can be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

The song “We have all the time in the world” sung by Louis Armstrong.

Clarkson or Clark? Would you rather watch *Top Gear* or *Civilisation*? What television programmes do you like?

By choice I would not watch either. However, my son and husband both love *Top Gear*, so inevitably I end up watching that. I prefer programmes about building houses and design (interiors, gardening, and fashion).

What is your most treasured possession?

A gold necklace my husband gave me on our first Christmas together as a couple. I wear it every day.

What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?

I have 16 solar panels on the roof of my house and cavity wall insulation. Wherever possible, I buy produce locally.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To make a discovery that will improve the treatment of bacterial infections.

Summarise your personality in three words

Honest, tenacious, demonstrative.

Where does alcohol fit into your life?

It doesn't; I have always been teetotal.

What is your pet hate?

People who complain without offering solutions.

If you weren't in your present position, what would you be doing instead?

I am greatly enjoying public engagement and meeting politicians and policy makers to discuss the issues of antibiotic resistance. I suspect that I would enjoy being in a policy advisory role.

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