

An interview with Nobel laureate Dr. Françoise Barré-Sinoussi

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Françoise Barré-Sinoussi (born 30 July 1947) is a French virologist and director of the Regulation of Retroviral Infections Division (Unité de Régulation des Infections Rétrovirales) at the *Institut Pasteur* in Paris, France. Born in Paris, France, Barré-Sinoussi performed some of the fundamental work in the identification of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) as the cause of AIDS. **In 2008, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine**, together with her former mentor, Luc Montagnier, for their discovery of HIV. [Source: [Wikipedia](#)]

This interview was taken by Syed Yasin Shahtaz Emanee in the backdrop of the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings 2014 as a group interview with five other scientific journalists. It appeared in the Gauhati Medical College Magazine 2014 (bit.ly/gmcmag14). We are thankful to Syed Yasin Shahtaz Emanee (Editor of the Magazine) for permission to reproduce it here.

You are from France and a woman. Did you find it hard to be a scientist?

? OK you know, When I started it was the 1970's. Then, a woman was far from science and thus there was no word called equality. It was a high position for male and low position for woman in the society. It was how I started. Yes it was very difficult. When I asked a simple question to the counselor at my institute after my PhD regarding my future career, he answered to me that you don't seem to me to make a career in science. I said "let me think about it." He said "You are kidding. You are female".

I made up a mindset that I will try and show that women can study science and also do a good job in it. If you see the number of Nobel Prizes, it is increasing for women which is great. I don't care about myself being male or female, what I care about is motivation and patience; people really like to make a lot of... you know... investment in themselves. I think that's the most important thing not the male or female.

Ma'am, your career has been in parallel with HIV, you are known for working in HIV and in the beginning of 1950s there was a lot of pessimism about whether HIV is going to get cured even today there is not a cure but there is optimism! Do you think that is normal?

? I don't really think that but there are good international initiatives. Recent statistics show that we need to do better coordinated research in that area in order to go faster. From my experience in the early 80's when scientists were working at it, they were working separately and now I know that takes more time, but I am quite optimistic that we can be successful in developing a strategy for clinical remission for patients and have the virus controlled. I am sure we can be successful.

And what can be the best way to proceed towards that?

? I don't have a magic basket you know. May be treat way early and in some countries patients like the Mississippi baby can be treated at birth and we will get no virus detected at 6 months. Very early treatment is an option, but this is not feasible on a large scale. That means we have to find another option because to detect HIV in people so early is almost impossible. We have to deactivate the reservoir and latent virus source. Work is going and it's not static. This is science in work. We are learning from anti cancer drugs. We are learning from vaccine, vaccines based on CMV mainly. But it will take time. I was a little upset when people were saying that it will be cured in 2020. I said, "My god! They should not do that. I can understand that's it's for fund raising but for people living with HIV, we should not do that."

Ma'am when you started to work on HIV, did you think it would be a pandemic of the kind it is now?

? No; when I started working in AIDS we were only working in patients from France. In USA and other countries we had the information that mainly gay and drug users were affected. In 1984-85 if I remember correctly, we thought we could imagine the situation in Africa but we were completely wrong. It was called as 4th disease, Gay sexual disease etc. This was a terrible mistake for which we are still paying today. There is still some tender discrimination with such population which do not allow us early treatment. This should be reduced. This is a fight that we have to win.

PC : Kathleen Raven

What do you have to say about the placebo effect being used in some randomised control trials? Is it unethical for a disease of characteristics like that of AIDS?

? In some studies we have no choice. Then we use a placebo to get an answer of a simple question. It is dependent on which exact research method you are using. It is not simple as we have to work with a strategy coordinated by the international research scenario map.

In case of HIV the treatment came without anticipation but it now depends on how.

You have talked about the affordability. I come from India and looking at the socioeconomic spectrum there, right from the super rich to those who cannot afford any form of treatment; how important do you think is working on behavioural changes?

? Everything is important in HIV. Everything is to be integrated. Working on behavioural aspects is a part of the preventive measures. For the present, we recommend a combined approach behaviour with the use

of safe sex measures and efficient drug therapy.

So what causes the difference between countries in terms of the fight against AIDS? Is it due to lack of access, policies or something else?

? Its always a mixture of different causes; not just one cause. Political willingness is an important factor but not the only factor. And it often is modulated by other factors. We have seen that in Botswana that there was a great political willingness to commit themselves to this fight in the highest degree; but they did not have doctors or health professionals at that time. We have to look into what resources are available and how they are being used.

How do you select the young students to work with you? What do you seek in people when you expect to work with someone?

? Motivation. If they are motivated about what they are doing and if they are passionate. You can find that out by talking to them. If they take themselves and their own ideas very seriously – that is an essential criteria for me.

Perhaps we can talk now about your wedding. It was in the lab right?!

? Yes, I was working that day. Before the ceremony, I was in the lab. It was a Saturday morning and like every Saturday morning I was sitting in my lab and I received a call from the person supposed to be my husband, at around 11-11:30 am and he asked me, “So you know, the ceremony will get over at 2; do you think you are going to make it?!” Well I was shocked, and I said to myself, “Oh its almost time!” Well then I went out immediately and I was on time, yes!

PC : Kathleen Raven

You have been considered by many as an activist-scientist. Do you think scientists should also be activists and have the courage to take science beyond their labs with a vision to change the world?

? It will be a bit ambitious to say that you can change the world but of course you can participate. I feel it is the part of the responsibility of a person, especially of someone working in the medical sciences, trying to develop a tool against a disease. When we think we have done a good job, like we have done in HIV, and then you see that these tools are not available to all the people in the world, then you become an activist.

Would that be your biggest frustration?

? It would be more than a frustration. I am angry. I am furious! It's not a personal frustration. I do not accept it. I feel there is a responsibility by people who did not take it. So we must make them feel responsible.

What might be the research paper you will publish in 5 years?

? I will retire! So I don't think I will be writing any! Although I would want my last research paper to be something about the cure; more precisely, something about a link between cure and vaccine. I think that is very important. It has been not to scientists themselves, but vaccine and cure research have been a bit different and I think I would like to see them getting merged. But you never know! I might also write a paper on the oppressive regimes and atrocities going on in various parts of the world!

Would you are run for elected office in a public position? In France or elsewhere?

? No. I am not interested in them. I mean I think I can do more, both for science and the people in general, without being in an office than being in it. I remember having a discussion with a former minister. She said that if one day if you are offered such a position, my opinion is that you never take it. When you are there, you are finished! Well I now look up to my inner voice and then I think she was right.

Besides your obvious love for science; what do you think you would have been if not a scientist?

? A doctor probably! Doctor working in the developing countries.

PC : Kathleen Raven

Is there any advice you would like to give to young scientists and students in general?

? Persistence. Never give up and never stop believing that you will and can make a difference. There is no finish line. Even when we come up with a cure for HIV, that will still mean we can use HIV as a tool for studying other diseases.

If you reach the pinnacle of say HIV research, maybe a cure, will it be wrong for us to be very happy, because it might slow our science down?

? No... You see, as I said, you are never finished. Like I said about the tool – I am very much interested in it being used as a model to develop tools against other diseases, even non communicable diseases. I would want researchers to again work together and take ideas from the HIV research and use it in solving other problems. It is very much possible.

In the very early days of HIV research, there was a rivalry between US & French researchers. There will always be rivalries in science. How to navigate those?

? I seek the answers to these kind of situation in Science itself. My answer to it is Data – hard fact. Truth. It is only solution. I accumulate data and show everyone the answer.

How do you manage your time? You have published more than 240 articles. Between science and so much traveling?

? Well don't ask me how I manage my time because I don't know! I don't manage my time anymore. This is terrible actually! I try to do my best; and I think I sleep very little. I am always in communication with the scientists back in my lab wherever I am. I will retire after the Melbourne Conference in July 2014; and probably I will continue to work for two more years; but yes, I will still be an activist. I will work with NGOs, communities, do orations maybe in Europe or different countries of the world. But there is no obligation.

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