



The story

“A Fight for Life that United a Field”

<http://www.nature.com/news/2011/111011/full/478163a.html>

by Lauren Gravitz

Nature, October 11, 2011

[see below pitch for Nature editor's response]

The pitch

Dear ,

My name is Lauren Gravitz and I'm a freelance science journalist based in Los Angeles. [A former Nature staffer] suggested I get in touch because I have a story I think might be well suited for the pages of Nature, but it's also one that's pretty time-sensitive and based on the announcement of today's medicine and physiology Nobel.

I have over a decade's worth of journalism experience under my belt, but for a couple of years I worked as a science writer in the communications department at Rockefeller University. That was where I first met Ralph Steinman, who shared this year's Nobel for his discovery of dendritic cells, which are one of the primary drivers of the immune system. Steinman was one of the 30 researchers on my beat and I met with him and his collaborators often to talk about their work--the group was investigating the use of dendritic cells as immunotherapy against AIDS, cancer, and other diseases. In the middle of this research, and during my tenure at Rockefeller, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In collaboration with his oncologists and in addition to his prescribed chemotherapies, he went about developing his own, personalized immunotherapy. He lived years longer than his diagnoses could have ever predicted.

I'm wondering if you might be interested in a piece that delves into the backstory: Steinman's research on this immunotherapy, how he and his colleagues built his own regimen, how he fought back his cancer, and how such therapies might be applied in the future. I have covered immunology, have some good info from my time at Rockefeller, am familiar with the work and the people involved, and I believe that

there's a story here that's not yet been told. If you're interested in having me write something, I'd love to talk with you further about it. I've attached my resume and am happy to send along clips.

With thanks,
-Lauren

Editor's response

Hi Lauren, thanks for the pitch. [We] would have loved to have this in features, but we think that the details of how Steinman's research affected his own treatment will come out sooner than we could actually get a feature to press, due to our schedules. As such we'd like to cover it in our news pages for next week's issue.

That's still a pretty tight turnaround - I'd need to have a draft waiting for me at 8am Friday morning, London time. We're probably looking at around 1000 words or so.

All the themes you mention are great: Steinman's research on this immunotherapy, how he and his colleagues built his own regimen, how he fought back his cancer, and how such therapies might be applied in the future.

Im also interested in the details of how he ended up being involved in several different clinical trials of dendritic cells. Science have already delved into the issue a bit:

<http://news.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2011/10/new-nobelists-used-his-discovery.html?ref=hp>

Specifically:

>> Steinman tried many experimental treatments, two of which involved dendritic cell therapies designed especially for him. A company, Argos Therapeutics, had a dendritic cell vaccine in trials for kidney cancer and personalized the vaccine for Steinman, even though his cancer was a different type; scientists at Baylor University in Texas did something similar for another dendritic cell vaccine, which they were testing in melanoma. Both were official clinical trials that were closely vetted by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Steinman also tried a therapy called GVAX, which aims to recruit dendritic cells in the body.

So both (all three?) were official clinical trials, all above board. But we were a little surprised that he had qualified for 2 or 3 such trials, since the requirements for acceptance on trials like these are generally pretty stringent. How did that work?

We also noted that Rockefeller released a statement <http://newswire.rockefeller.edu/?page=engine&id=1192> saying that:

>> his life was extended using a dendritic-cell based immunotherapy of his own design

Im wondering whether the evidence of that life extension has actually been published, or otherwise what the claim is based on?

In writing the piece, I think you'd need to introduce yourself into the story fairly high up - 3rd or 4th graf - explaining how you were actually there when some of these discussion were going on. (I think it'll make for a better narrative, and it also means were very upfront about that fact that you're a former employee of Rockefeller)

Anyway, we could offer you a rate of US\$X per word. Feel free to give me a call / email if you need to discuss further

Cheers