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Profile

A conversation with Stephen Hoffman

Scientist survives several near misses -- including a crash-landing -- before turning his efforts toward fighting malaria

Washington Business Journal - March 17, 2006 by [Neil Adler](#) Staff Reporter

Off on his own in South America, he gets typhoid. In California, he is infected with malaria. On his way to a research site in Africa, the plane carrying him crash-lands.

Is Stephen Hoffman, the leader of malaria-vaccine developer Sanaria, scared by his past skirmishes with death? Sometimes.

Is he lucky? Perhaps.

Is he frustrated that more isn't being done to fight diseases such as malaria? You bet.

A doctor, longtime malaria researcher for the Navy and former executive of Rockville-based [Celera Genomics](#), Hoffman is a tropical disease expert who's been all over the globe trying to come up with new treatments for malaria, typhoid and other diseases that devastate many Third World countries.

Hoffman hopes to have one or more malaria vaccines on the market in the next five to 10 years. However, the company needs to raise enormous amounts of money.

Hoffman could have gone the more conventional route and practiced family medicine, but that wasn't in his blood. He wanted something different. He wanted to tackle diseases often ignored by Big Pharma because they're most prevalent in impoverished countries.

His purpose, unlike the science, is simple: save lives and prevent new cases of malaria, which knocks people low with cycles of serious chills and fever. Hoffman knows. He's been there.

How did your career come about?

I was sitting in a valley in Israel on my college spring break. I was a junior and spent a lot of time soul searching. At the time I was a political philosophy major. I decided that I wanted to try to do something on my own, to help people. That's how I got into medicine.

I made a decision my second year in medical school that I wanted to get into tropical medicine. My personal goal was to work on something that could have the most impact. My colleagues do well in cardiology and other areas, but I wanted to go a different route. The move to tropical medicine made sense for me. I absolutely couldn't have found a better profession.

How difficult can it be working in this area?

I've seen children die in my arms, after thinking I had found a way to help them. You think you've saved a 3-year-old's life and then find out two hours later he or she died. It's unimaginable. You go from elation to depression. It's terribly frustrating.

You've experienced firsthand some of the terrible diseases found in tropical climates.

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I was really quite ill with both typhoid and malaria. I was in Ecuador, where I didn't know a soul, when I got typhoid. I had taken a year off from medical school to explore and find myself and, frankly, become more mature. I traveled throughout South America, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru. I studied with witch doctors in the jungle. It was an unbelievable experience. When I got typhoid at first I thought I was lovesick. I had just dropped off my girlfriend at the airport. Then my temperature climbed to 104 or 105. I knew it was something else.

I got malaria when volunteering in a trial for a potential malaria vaccine. I was making a presentation in San Diego when I had an uncontrolled, shaky chill. I was in the Navy at the time. I called up my commander and asked if I could take a first-class flight home [to Washington]. My commander told me to stay in San Diego. I woke up at like 1 in the morning with a fever. I thought it was the flu. I called my wife. She told me I was wrong. I had malaria.

What did you learn from those challenges?

It was tough, but going through those experiences helps a lot now. I have a lot of empathy for people affected by these diseases. You learn about the joy of life and how quickly it can end. We are all citizens of the world. Tropical medicine is designed to help the poorest of the poor and the sickest of the sick.

You had another scare in Africa.

It was the late 1980s, and I was doing research with my wife, a biologist. There were no labs in western Kenya so we used to take a plane back and forth to the labs. One day we were flying in a 40- to 50-seat plane. I was sleeping, and my wife was sitting by the window and noticed the view was much better than she had remembered. Then all of a sudden we hit the ground. I woke up, thinking: What's going on? People were climbing all over each other. It was pretty scary.

After a long Navy career you changed course, joining Celera late in 2000. What was that like?

I came to Celera because of a close relationship with [company president] Craig Venter. We had discussed starting a vaccine company. I was really very involved in malaria vaccine development at the time. The opportunity to come to a place with vision, courage, \$1 billion in the bank and a commitment to developing new products using the human genome was enormous. With some trepidation, I really switched careers. It was just a phenomenal experience.

What's your goal with Sanaria?

We spend every waking hour attempting to develop a vaccine to save 2 million lives each year and prevent 500 million cases of malaria each year. That's our No. 1 mission and our

No. 10 mission. I can't imagine a reason for going to work that is any more fulfilling or challenging. If we fulfill our mission, there will be financial rewards for the company.

While Sanaria's malaria vaccine is at least a few years away from market, some say the vaccine could have greater than 90 percent protection. What do you think?

It is going to happen, and it would be truly phenomenal.

If you weren't doing malaria research what would you do?

There are many, many things I love doing. But I'm not sure about a next career. I'd have to give that a lot of thought.

What do you want people to say about you in the future?

You know the answer to this one. He developed a malaria vaccine. How could anyone dream of more of an accomplishment in life?

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