

## CORRECTION

### Robert Robinson and penicillin: an unnoticed document in the saga of its structure

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In introducing our recent historical essay on the controversy over the structure of penicillin [1], we wrote

The investigation of penicillin, which had been discovered by Alexander Fleming at St Mary's Hospital in London ten years earlier, but not taken serious advantage of, was initiated in the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology in Oxford by Howard Florey in 1938. Florey recruited to his team in turn Ernst Chain, a refugee from Hitler, Norman Heatley, and Abraham ...

Professor Sir Henry Harris has gently indicated an error here. In our haste to get to the point of the paper, we oversimplified what we said about what took place just before the War, in a way which is misleading.

The detailed facts [2–5] are somewhat fogged, but certainly more complex than we implied. It is clear that Florey was the key figure, and, as he was Head of the Sir William Dunn School, recruitment and the general direction of research was in his hands. He had not only the power but also had the necessary drive. The initiation of the penicillin programme, however, was not a policy decision taken by him in isolation. It evolved from an academic interest in the mode of action of lysozyme, which led in turn to a similarly academic interest in other antibacterial substances. Chain, who arrived in the Dunn School in 1935, initially worked on various topics, but especially on lysozyme, which Florey guided him to. When that work

drew to a natural pause, Florey suggested a wide-ranging literature survey of antibiosis, which Chain made. Chain proposed a number of lines for further investigation, of which penicillin was one, and the decision to go for penicillin arose from discussions between Florey and Chain. The organisation of what we have called a 'team' came a little later.

This correction may seem hair-splitting, but it seems called for because there has already been much muddled hagiographic writing about the road to penicillin, and popular science writers, and even serious historians, have a tendency to give each other's infelicities apparent authority by repetition.

### REFERENCES

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4. Macfarlane G. Lysozyme leads to penicillin. *Howard Florey. The Making of Great Scientist.* Oxford, 1979; 272–293, Chapt. 12.
5. Harris H. Howard Florey and the development of penicillin. *Notes Rec. R. Soc.* 1999; **53**: 243–252.