

About Dr. Dennis Slamon

By Adrienne Papp

Dr. Dennis Slamon is one of the miracle workers at the center of Stand Up To Cancer. His role in the development of Herceptin is widely known and celebrated in philanthropic circles, the cancer community, scientific journals, and what he refers to as “the lay press.” Robert Bazell’s book *HER-2: The Making of Herceptin, a Revolutionary Treatment for Breast Cancer*, details Slamon’s often times frustrated but ultimately triumphant journey through the maze of institutional biomedical science out onto the crest of a new wave of targeted exploration and therapy in translational cancer research.



Dr. Dennis Slamon

Picture credit: UCLA

Bazell’s book, “told like a good television script,” according to the New York Times Book Review, is the basis for an upcoming Lifetime movie, with Harry Connick, Jr. playing the leading man: Dennis Slamon. So even if you haven’t heard the story yet, get basic cable and

you'll be able to tune in at some point in the near future to get the scoop. The gist of the story of Herceptin, and in part, Dennis Slamon (POSSIBLE SPOILER ALERT), is this:

Dennis Slamon is from New Castle, PA, just West of Pittsburgh—a region known more for its propensity to produce hall-of-fame quarterbacks than world-class oncologists. But Dennis Slamon wasn't very good at football. And he drew what seemed to be the only biology teacher at his high school who wasn't a member of the football team's coaching staff.

Instead, he got a rookie. "This guy was just starting. He had a fire in his belly, was excited about the subject, and just turned me on to this whole idea of biology and biologic processes. And what it meant, and it's sort of secrets and the questions of life itself." By then Slamon already knew the power of medicine, learned as child when he watched as his parents' faces would flood with relief each time the doctor set foot in the Slamon home on a house call.

So it was probably a good thing that he turned out not to have a golden arm. Nothing against Dan Marino or Joe Montana, but Slamon ended up becoming a doctor and a researcher; his unwavering belief in the power of hard, objective data helped him to join the ranks of those who understood breast cancer not as one single disease but as having identifiable subtypes, various pathways. This in turn led him to help identify a genetic alteration that was part of the pathogenesis of one of the more aggressive forms of breast cancer. His belief in looking at results without pre-conceived notions led him toward the theory that antibodies might reverse or mitigate the effect of the fateful alteration and derail the disease.

It very nearly didn't happen. Skepticism ran deep, and Slamon and his closest colleagues worked hard to champion the power of the data that they produced. Eventually, relief came in the form of a cash grant from Revlon and the Entertainment Industry Foundation, with efforts spearheaded by Lilly Tartikoff and Lisa Paulsen.



INTERVIEW

Dennis J Slamon, MD, PhD

Dr Slamon is Professor of Medicine, Chief of the Division of Hematology/Oncology and Director of Clinical/Translational Research at the Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA in Los Angeles, California.

Picture Credit: UCLA



The 16th Annual Entertainment Industry Foundation Revlon Run/walk For Women Times Square, NYC May 4, 2013
 Photos by Sonia Moskowitz, Globe Photos Inc 2013 Alan Ennis, Lilly Tartikoff, Dr. Dennis Slamon, Lisa Paulsen [Read Less](#)



Dr. Dennis Slamon and Harry Conick Jr. discuss Herceptin during shooting the film: *“Living Proof”*

Picture Credit: UCLA

By 1998, Herceptin broke through clinical trials to become one of the first gene-based therapies for cancer. It targeted the HER-2 alteration and helped to change the landscape of cancer research and treatment, transforming one of the most lethal forms of breast cancer into one of the most manageable. Future generations of women can be grateful that Dennis Slamon was a lousy football player, or he might never have jack-hammered his way from New Castle to new science and triumphed over the calcified cognoscenti regulating research.

It's a good story, made even better by the fact that it's not fiction.

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