Daniel Bovet (1907-1992) was born in Switzerland and graduated from the University of Geneva. He did his important work at the Pasteur Institute, Paris under Ernest Fourneau. Prontosil, discovered earlier by Domagk (1935), was effective against streptococci in the body, but failed to act on in vitro cultures. He reasoned that therapeutic action was due to dye’s active molecule, and after many months of research with the associates, he isolated active therapeutic compound, sulphanilamide. Over the next several years, his team synthesized many derivatives among the group of sulpha drugs, which saved millions of lives during WW-II.

In 1937, Bovet turned his attention to histamine. Since free histamine caused allergic reactions, he believed that substance was needed to block histamine in the body. He with his assistants soon synthesized first antihistamine, which proved too toxic in animals; after performing thousands of experiments, in 1941, he discovered the first commercially viable antihistamine- pyrilamine. In the course of time newer and safer H1 receptor blockers were introduced and still more are emerging.

Bovet migrated to Italy in 1947 and became an Italian citizen. He was appointed Director of Laboratory Therapeutics at Institute Superiora diSanita in Rome. Chemically pure curare, from South American arrow poison, was used as muscle relaxant during surgery; however its effect was unpredictable. Bovet set the task of finding synthetic and safer form of the drug; and after eight years of work, he finally isolated gallamine and succinylcholine. During the research, he spent some time with South American Indians; he later humorously admitted that it was just a pretext for his spirit of adventure.

Bovet became Professor of Psychopharmacology at the University of Rome, in 1971. In that position, he reflected still another field of research. As early as 1957, Time had reported Bovet’s belief that the key to mental illness was in the chemistry. While not producing dramatic breakthrough, he contributed much of important basic research, in the field.

Bovet received Nobel Prize in Physiology & Medicine in 1957. He never made any money from his scientific discoveries. Concerned with, the Impact of scientific discovery on politico- social and economic affairs, he remarked: “Unfortunately, in our world rife with illiteracy, hunger, inadequate diet, and lack of adequate water supply, - even the best of drugs are ineffective for people living in poverty and poor hygienic conditions”.

Contributed by
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