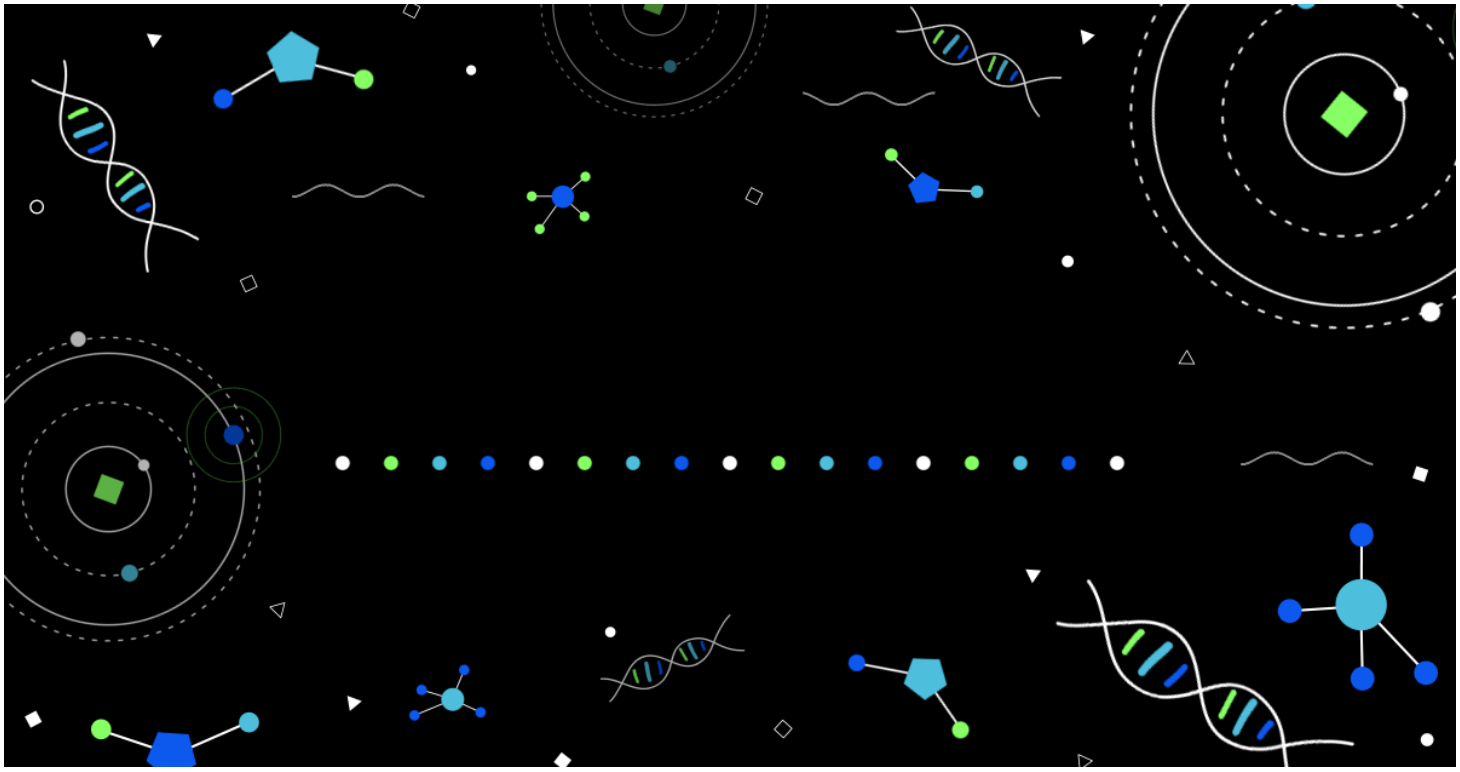
This Scientist's Life: Mera Tilley

Tuesday, March 7, 2017



What makes a great scientist?

In 2016, the National Academy of Sciences posed that question in a survey of top U.S. scientists, finding that the character traits most valued among their peers are honesty (64%), curiosity (60%), perseverance (34%), and objectivity (21%).

“The end goal is to affect lives," says Mera Tilley.

For those of us outside the lab, the people and personalities driving today’s leading innovations remains largely unknown. To better get to know some of the faces behind Pfizer’s research, we’re launching a new interview series with its scientists. Along the

way, we hope to provide insight into who they are, what motivates them, and how their seemingly complex research can have life-changing impact in our lives.

Meet Mera Tilley, a geneticist and Director in Pfizer's Early Clinical Development Group in Kendall Square in Cambridge, who's an expert in genetic biomarkers, studying the link between people's genes, inflammatory diseases and their response to medicines.

Tilley has always been motivated by a curiosity to better understand the world around her. As a precocious middle school student, she diagnosed why her little brother had difficulty reading some texts. "We didn't figure it out until I brought home my 7th grade biology textbook with one of those colorblind tests and he couldn't read the numbers in the book – in red and green. Turns out, he was a smart kid, but he was colorblind!"

She was only a teenager when she lost her mother. Her passing gave her resolve to dedicate her career to science, to seek answers that can improve the health and well-being of other people.

As her career progresses, Tilley is focused on better understanding diseases that disproportionally affect women of color, such as lupus. "It's most common in women of color. There is a huge unmet need to find a new treatment."

She'd also like to see an increase in genetic research in minority populations. "The majority of genetic studies are done in European populations. We know very little about the genetics of the rest of us. The largest genetic study of African Americans with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) had less than 1,000 patients."

In 2012, she made the leap from working as a geneticist at the National Institutes of Health to the private sector. "Coming to Pfizer has been my dream career, because it's allowed me to translate basic research into something that makes a real-life impact. To be in a place where I can advocate for minorities and translate research into clinical impact — that's exciting."

To learn more about careers in science at Pfizer, explore our current opportunities.

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