



# Happy Accidents: Serendipity in Modern Medical Breakthroughs

By Morton A. Meyers

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This is Morton Meyers' fascinating, entertaining, and highly accessible look at the surprising role serendipity played in some of the most important medical discoveries in the 20th century. Though within the scientific community a certain stigma is attached to chance discovery because it is wrongly seen as pure luck, happy accidents happen every day and Meyers shows how it takes intelligence, insight, and creativity to recognize a "Eureka! I found what I wasn't look for!" moment and know what to do next. Penicillin, chemotherapy drugs, X-rays, Valium, the Pap smear, and Viagra were all discovered accidentally, stumbled upon in search of something else. In discussing these medical breakthroughs and others, Dr. Meyers makes a cogent, highly engaging argument for a more creative, rather than purely linear, approach to science.

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*By Morton A. Meyers*

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## **Happy Accidents: Serendipity in Modern Medical Breakthroughs** By Morton A. Meyers **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Meyers, professor emeritus of radiology and internal medicine at SUNY–Stony Brook, has a simple message: the most significant breakthroughs in medical research usually came about when people were looking for something else entirely. Lithium's effect on bipolar disorder, for example, was discovered because a scientist was taking advantage of its solubility to run toxicity tests on patients. Likewise, Viagra was developed during experiments on medications designed to treat angina. Meyers has dozens of stories like this, in the areas of antibiotics, cancer treatments, cardiovascular therapy and antidepressants. The anecdotes are lively and filled with miniportraits of important doctors like Paul Ehrlich (who pioneered the use of chemistry to develop medical treatments) and Arthur Voorhees (who stumbled onto the treatment for abdominal aortic aneurysms), but some chapters feel forcefully wedged in. The role of accident in creating the thalidomide molecule is glossed in one sentence, and too little information is given about contemporary research into the therapeutic use of LSD to draw any meaningful conclusions (although it's a good excuse to revisit the story of Albert Hofmann's bicycle ride). But it will be hard to argue with Meyers's criticism of a rigid scientific culture that discourages experimenters from keeping an eye out for the unexpected. (*Apr.*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

To radiologist and internist Meyers, the phrase *creative scientific research* has become an oxymoron in today's culture of research grants, peer review boards, pharmaceutical companies, overly regimented education, and scientific journals. Rebuffing all that, he details dozens of medicines currently saving millions of lives that are the results of serendipity, which he defines as "chance plus judgment"--medicines discovered while researchers were looking in quite another, often the opposite, direction. To be serendipitous, he says, a chance discovery must be accompanied by the researcher's "ability to recognize an important anomaly or to draw analogies that are not obvious." Creativity is key. In interviews with several Nobel laureates, many readily admit applying so-called post facto logic to the sequence of their reasoning when they make their presentations because, Meyers notes, getting to a new idea is not a linear process. Meyers' accounts of such happy accidents as the discoveries of the lifesaving anticoagulant Coumadin, the manic-depression therapeutic lithium, and others is a significant brief on creativity's critical role in medical research. *Donna Chavez*

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About the Author

Morton Meyers is emeritus professor and chairman of radiology and emeritus professor of internal medicine in the School of Medicine of the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. He lives in East Setauket, NY.

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