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Executive Profile: Annalisa Jenkins can tie a nautical knot and discover genetic cures with the best of them

DON SEIFFERT
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Annalisa Jenkins

Title: Chief executive officer, Dimension Therapeutics

Age: 50

Education: Bachelor's degree in medicine, St. Bartholomew's Medical School (London) 1987

Residence: Kendall Square

When Annalisa Jenkins first went to the recruiting office for the British Royal Navy in 1984 at the age of 19, she was told the military branch didn't accept women. Alas, she was commissioned a year later following a rule change that enabled her to be one of the British navy's first female medics, even if it meant not being stationed on a Navy ship.

It would be the first of, well, many career firsts that has propelled Jenkins to the corner office of Dimension Therapeutics, a not-your-average biotech in Cambridge advancing treatments for rare genetic diseases.

Jenkins would continue her education, and joined the British Royal Navy full time in 1987. It would be another three years, after Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait, when she got the call.

"We want you to join a ship in a month," Jenkins remembers being told. "I said, 'Hang on a minute. I thought I wasn't going to go to sea?'"

She ended up as one of the first females ever to go to sea in the British Navy, doing highly dangerous mine counter-measure work in the northern part of the Persian Gulf. She was also the first female physician ever to serve on the front lines in the Navy, and was the only woman serving with 700 men on the ship for about a year.

Twenty-five years later and a continent away, as CEO of one of Greater Boston's leading gene therapy companies,



JOHN SOARES

Annalisa Jenkins, CEO of Dimension Therapeutics.

Jenkins still finds herself as a female working in the predominantly male field of biotech. And while she says she's "not a champion for women," the 53-employee company she now heads is 70 percent composed of female employees, including most of the top management.

"I didn't set out to build a female company," she said. "I just set out to build a company based on talent with a meritocratic approach to talent acquisition, and this is where we are."

Dimension had been founded just nine months before Jenkins joined in September 2014. To do so, she left her position as head of global research and development for Merck Serono, making her Dimension employee No. 11.

She said the move was prompted by her interest in applying gene therapy – the addition of a gene missing in patients

to spur the production of proteins – to diseases such as hemophilia. In a recent interview, she describes hemophilia B (the less common of the two main forms of the disease) to be "low-hanging fruit" in the field of gene therapy, but said she told her staff soon after joining that, "We're not a hemophilia company, we're a gene therapy company."

The company, which she took public last October with a \$72 million initial public offering, now has 10 identified diseases it plans to target, most of which will be revealed over the next year. All of them are centered around the liver. Of those, she said her company worked to narrow down a list of 400 possible diseases with known genetic causes; an animal model; a known biomarker; and at least 5,000 patients globally.

Bruce Booth, partner at Atlas Venture, described Jenkins in an email as "a charismatic, sharp thinker with solid instincts and an openness to new ideas." Booth has known her ever since she left a 12-year career at Bristol-Myers Squibb to begin working for Merck Serono in 2011, where she managed the company's external research and development efforts.

"Signing her up was a great coup for Dimension Therapeutics," said Booth.

Jenkins' Kendall Square office reflects her interests outside of work. For example, artwork from Rwanda stems from her time at Bristol-Myers helping to supply generic medicines to a large part of Africa. It's a global sensibility she's passed along to her two children – both of whom are in their early 20s – and which she says has helped make her career to date "characterized by multiple very interesting choices."

"I would say I've lived as a woman in a sea of men throughout my career, whether that be in the Navy, cardiology, or now in the pharmaceutical industry. And I've always felt enriched by that and empowered by that," she said.