Who am I?

Transcript of interview with Henry Molaison

As a boy, Henry Molaison (1926–2008) had severe epilepsy. Surgeons removed part of his brain – the hippocampus – to stop the fits he experienced. But afterwards Henry could no longer form new memories. His amnesia fascinated memory researchers, who studied him for the rest of his life as 'patient HM'.

Neuroscientist Suzanne Corkin conducted many interviews with patient HM. Because of his amnesia, Henry never remembered Suzanne – but she knew him for over 30 years, through many stages of life.

This is a transcript of an audio interview between Suzanne Corkin and Henry Molaison at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1992. Further information about Henry Molaison is available in the *Who am I?* gallery on the first floor.

Transcript:

I understand that you have a little bit of trouble remembering things?

HM: Yes, I do.

Is it harder for you to remember things than it is for other people to remember things?

HM: Yes, I think it is. But, a funny thing – I go with crossword puzzles now, a lot more than I used to.

Really? Why is that?

HM: Because then maybe I remember words. And sometimes I don't have to look them up, I remember them.

You are terrific at remembering words.

HM: Well I know I started doing the crossword puzzles in books. You know, I've got several books here. And I belong to that club too.

Tell me about the club?

HM: Well they get me to join it [pause]. This is a crossword club in Old Faybrook.

Great.

HM: And it tells you just how... well the puzzles they have enclosed, like May 1992 puzzles enclosed in this letter.

And do you enjoy those?

HM: Yes. Well, I like them more than... I used to do them in the newspaper before I was sick and everything.

And when was that? How long ago was that?

HM: Well, when I was 15, I got really sick. That was the first time.

What kind of sickness was it?

HM: Well they called it epilepsy at the time.

And how did that affect you?

HM: I knew that if I had it, that it would be cured sooner or later. And that's what I just have to look forward to, in a way.

Right.

HM: And just because there's a lot of things that I couldn't do. But I knew that some day that they would possibly do it to me, and I could get parts of my memory back, in a way.

How do you feel about having a problem remembering things?

HM: Well, I don't feel good about it. But I think what is found out about me will help the medical people. Scan other people too, and help them.

How long have you had trouble remembering things?

HM: That I don't know myself [laughing]. I can't tell you, because I don't remember.

Well do you think it's days, or weeks? Months, years?

HM: Well, see I can't put it exactly on a day, week or month or year basis.

But do you think it's been more than a year that you've had this problem?

HM: I think it's about that. About a year or more.

Why are you here?

HM: Well, I think it's because I have epileptic seizures. And they started on my 15th birthday. And I was sick, and I used to have petit mals and grand mals – both.

And do you have them now?

HM: See, I don't remember now.

OK. How long have you been here? How long have you been at MIT this time?

HM: I think about a year and a half. I'm not sure of that too.

Can you tell me what day of the week it is?

HM: No, I can't.

How about the month?

HM: I think it's near April, but...

It's actually May.

HM: Well, so I'm a month before. May.

You were very close. And what year do you think it is?

HM: I think 1992.

Very good. Good for you. That's exactly right. Terrific.

HM: I'll admit I was having an argument with myself right there. Was it '91 or '92?

How old are you now?

HM: Well, let's see [pause]. Oh, gee [pause]. I can't think right off what it is. I know I was born in '26.

What decade? Are you in your 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s?

HM: I think 40s or 50s. Right there. On the borderline of that.

When you're not at MIT, what do you do during a typical day?

HM: See, that's what I don't... I don't remember things.

Do you know what you did yesterday?

HM: No, I don't.

How about this morning?

HM: I don't even remember that.

Could you tell me what you had for lunch today?

HM: I don't know, tell you the truth.

What do you think you'll do tomorrow?

HM: Whatever is beneficial.

Good answer. Are you happy?

HM: Yes. Well, the way I figure it is, what they find out about me helps them to help other people. And that's more important. That's what I thought of being too – a doctor.

Really?

HM: A brain surgeon. And as soon as I started to wear glasses in the way, I said no to myself.

Why?

HM: Because [in] brain surgery you have bright lights and that'll be an extra glare from the rim of your glass that would... Right at the moment you want to make a regular severance, just move a little too far, and that person could be paralysed on one side too.

Are you ever sad?

HM: No, I feel what is done about me helps the doctors and the nurses, and everybody helps other people.

What a wonderful outlook.

HM: And I feel that's more important in a way. Because what they learn about me, they can also do on someone else, or not do on someone else.

Exactly.

HM: Because of just that thought I had. And I wanted to be a surgeon myself.

Really?

HM: Yeah. But as soon as I started wearing glasses, I said no to myself. I said suppose an attendant was to mop your brow and hit your glasses and knock them aside.

Oops.

HM: You could make the wrong movement then. And that would be detrimental to you, in a way, performing an operation and everything.

Right.

HM: That's what I thought of.

Well I think you're absolutely right. Thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW