Pathologist Stephen Galli, M.D., a world-renowned expert on mast cells and the chair of the Department of Pathology at Stanford, often laces his talks at research meetings with clever limericks that he's written about his work. Here's a sample:

The mast cell has earned a bad name,
Because for wheezing it's partly to blame.
But it also keeps us all healthy,
Despite pathogens stealthy,
By helping us win in the host-defense game.

“Sometimes limericks come up to me and say, ‘I remember you. You told those limericks about mast cells,’” Galli says, joking that he figures it’s better to be remembered for something than to be forgotten.

But Galli will hardly be forgotten. He is well known for his research on the role that mast cells and basophils play in allergic and other immunological or inflammatory responses. Mast cells and basophils are types of white blood cells that when activated by allergens release histamines, which in turn cause tissues to swell, make eyes water, and trigger other equally unpleasant symptoms associated with allergic reactions. Recently Galli and his team discovered a protein, called RabGEF1, that may help keep allergic reactions in check—in mice, anyway. That study was published in the August issue of Nature Immunology.

Galli has been working with mast cells and basophils for about 30 years, ever since he did his residency in pathology at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) in Boston in the 1970s. But he can trace his interest in science even further back. “I have an essay I wrote in the—maybe it was the third grade,” he says, “in which I said I wanted ‘to be a scientist when I grow up.’” Galli can trace his interest in science way back. “I have an essay I wrote in the—maybe it was the third grade,” he says, “in which I said I wanted ‘to be a scientist when I grow up.’”

Galli even took a year off from medical school to work in a tumor immunology lab at what is now the Dana-Farber Cancer Research Institute. When it came time to choose a residency, however, he realized he still didn’t know what he wanted to specialize in. His advisor suggested that he do a year of pathology—it would give him an excellent background in medicine as well as provide him with more time to make up his mind. Galli wound up at MGH—his first choice because he wanted to work with Benjamin Castleman, M.D., MGH’s chair of pathology and the editor of a series of case reports in the New England Journal of Medicine.

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In fact, when Galli was in medical school—two years in DMS’s preclinical program and two years at Harvard—he did not intend to become a pathologist. Instead, he was interested in tumor immunology. He even took a year off from medical school to work in a tumor immunology lab at what is now the Dana-Farber Cancer Research Institute. When it came time to choose a residency, however, he realized he still didn’t know what he wanted to specialize in. His advisor suggested that he do a year of pathology—it would give him an excellent background in medicine as well as provide him with more time to make up his mind. Galli wound up at MGH—his first choice because he wanted to work with Benjamin Castleman, M.D., MGH’s chair of pathology and the editor of a series of case reports in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Laura Carter is the associate editor of Dartmouth Medicine magazine.
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