

Marie Curie is perhaps the most famous woman in science, she contributed greatly to the study of radioactivity. She is famous for her exciting discoveries and for how hard she worked when everything was against her. She was born in 1866 in Warsaw, Poland. Her parents were both teachers. She was often top of her class in school and she loved learning.

Marie moved to France to study at a famous university. She was so poor she had to rent a tiny attic near to the university. She was introduced to Pierre Curie, (who was a French physicist, and a professor at Marie's university, and had recently made a name for himself with his development of 'piezoelectricity in crystals and magnetism'), by a friend and they got along well. When she decided that she needed more space for her experiments she moved in with Pierre Curie and after a year she married Pierre.

Marie, being influenced by a close colleague called Antoine Henri Becquerel (who had recently discovered the natural emission of 'uranium salts' during a process which would be later named natural radiation.) was very interested in the element uranium and the radiation that came from it. She thought that the radiation was coming from an unknown ingredient inside the uranium. One day Marie and Pierre saw a strange blue glow coming from their shed in which they did most of their work and where the element they had called 'radium' was stored, which was, at that time a totally unknown atom. They also discovered another radioactive element called 'polonium' which they named after Poland.

Encouraged by Marie's colleague, both Marie and Pierre began work to discover other substances that emitted particle rays. Although Marie was the 'leader' of the project, Pierre gave up some of his classes to help his wife in her project. They began their project by examining uranium ore called pitchblende.

In 1903, people began to realise that the work that the Curies were doing was very important and they were awarded the Nobel Prize for physics. Both Marie and Pierre were handling very lethal radioactive material with their bare hands. Neither of them realised that the work that they were doing was extremely dangerous.

In 1906 Pierre died in a street accident. Shock broke Marie down completely to begin with, but she pulled herself together and carried on with her life. Marie carried on researching and took over Pierre's classes, teaching at Sorbonne University and became the first ever female professor at the University.

She discovered a ray which she called an x-ray. She found that x-rays could be used to make pictures of the inside of the human body, and they could also kill cancer cells. In 1911 Marie was awarded a second Nobel Prize. Marie set up the radium institute in Paris, a laboratory in Poland and several other x-ray laboratories. She helped to train women to use the x-ray machines so that they could help doctors all over Europe.

By the 1920s, companies were cashing in on the strange new chemical. They made radium face powder, beauty creams, radium watch dials which glowed in the dark and glow in the dark false teeth. The products were a disaster because the radioactivity in radium made it really harmful.

Marie never stopped her research of radium therapy except during world war 1, where she helped the war by driving an ambulance.

In 1934, Marie died from leukaemia, which was probably caused by the radioactivity that she had been working with for so long.

In her honour the radium institute was renamed the Curie institute. Scientists still work there today, but with much stricter safety rules. Marie's notebooks have to be locked away because they are so contaminated with the radioactive chemicals that they are too dangerous to touch.