People

Awards

Four young investigators receive the first Paul A. Marks Prize for Cancer Research

Titia de Lange, Stephen J. Elledge, William G. Kaelin, Jr and Xiaodong Wang are the recipients of the first Paul Marks Prize for Cancer Research. This award recognizes young investigators (no older than 45 years) who have made significant contributions to the basic understanding and treatment of cancer and is named after Paul A. Marks, President Emeritus of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC, New York, NY, USA).

Lange is the Leon Hess Professor and Head of the Laboratory of Cell Biology and Genetics at the Rockefeller University (New York, NY, USA) and is being honoured for her discoveries of the key components of the protein machinery that binds telomeres. Normal cells eventually stop dividing because they lose telomere function. However, tumour cells have found a way to circumvent this problem by maintaining their telomeres with every cell division. Lange says that: 'Our next step is to look at how normal cells are alerted when telomeres stop functioning, because this will tell us how the telomere tumour-suppressor pathway works.'

Elledge is an investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (Chevy Chase, MD, USA) and Professor in the Department of Biochemistry at the Baylor College of Medicine (Houston, TX, USA) and has identified two related but independent systems involved in the cell cycle. One system helps cells identify and respond to cell damage, thereby avoiding replication of damaged cells and hence, the potential for the development of cancer. Elledge has also discovered major components of a protein complex that targets other proteins in the cell for degradation, because failure of this mechanism can lead to cancer. Elledge suggested that: 'Once we fully understand this damage-recognition pathway, we will be able to exploit the vulnerability of cells that do not have it and develop drug therapies to target those cells.'

Kaelin is an investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (Boston, MA, USA) and Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School (MA, USA) and discovered the novel mechanism used by the von Hippel–Lindau (VHL) protein to protect against tumour formation. An abnormal VHL protein is found in Hippel–Lindau disease, which is characterized by a high risk of certain cancers including kidney cancer. Kaelin said: 'This is a rare syndrome but it can teach us a lot about normal human physiology.'

Finally, Wang, is an assistant investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and George L. MacGregor Distinguished Chair Professor in Biomedical Science at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center (Dallas, TX, USA) where he discovered that, in programmed cell death in mammalian cells, mitochondria release several mitochondrial proteins including cytochrome C. However, how these signals that initiate cell death are linked to mitochondria is still unknown. Wang commented that 'Once we figure it out, it could be a target for future therapies.'

The awardees were selected by a panel chaired by Joan Massague, who leads the MSKCC Cell Biology Program. The award of US$125,000 will be shared among the four recipients.

Appointments

Michael Friedman takes on public health role at PhRMA

Michael Friedman, former Head of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Senior Vice-President of Pharmacia Corp. has taken up the role of Chief Medical Officer for Biomedical Preparedness for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA; Washington, DC, USA).

In this role, he will lead the US pharmaceutical industry's initiative to protect public health and will ensure that the industry works closely and effectively with all federal agencies including the Department of Health and Human Services, the FDA, the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control.

Friedman has been on active duty for many years in the Public Health Service since 1970, serving as Rear Admiral and Assistant Surgeon General during this time. He currently remains as a reserve officer and will also continue in his role at Pharmacia.

Ranajit Chakraborty to lead new Center for Genome Information

Ranajit Chakraborty has joined the University of Cincinnati (UC) Medical Center (Cincinnati, OH, USA) as Director of the newly created UC Center for Genome Information and the first Robert A. Kehoe Chair of Environmental Health.

Chakraborty leaves his position as Allan King Professor of Biological Sciences, Population Genetics and Biometry at the University of Texas Health Science Center (Houston, TX, USA). The UC Center for Genome Information was established to create a research program for understanding the genetic basis for complex diseases such as cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

Chakraborty and a graduate student wrote the software that is being used by the US Government to identify the DNA of the victims of the September 11 attacks. He is also a founding fellow of the American College of Epidemiology and has served on the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation review panels, and the National DNA Advisory Board and the DNA Subcommission of the State of New York. In 1998, he was given the award for 'Outstanding Contributions during the Decade of DNA, 1988–1998' by the FBI and the 'Man of the Year' in 1996 by the Cultural Association of Bengal, New York.

John Hutton, Dean of the UC College of Medicine said: 'Medical schools rarely have the opportunity to recruit an internationally renowned, highly productive scientist like Dr Chakraborty. His presence truly propels Cincinnati to leadership in the burgeoning and important field of human genomics by taking advantage of knowledge of the sequence of human DNA to identify causes of common human diseases.'

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