AACR and Landon Foundation Support the Next Generation of Researchers With INNOVATOR Awards

AACR

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CHICAGO — The American Association for Cancer Research and the Kirk A. and Dorothy P. Landon Foundation will present three INNOVATOR Awards at the AACR Annual Meeting 2012, held here March 31 – April 4.

- The Fifth Annual Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Award for Cancer Prevention Research will be presented to Guang Peng, M.D., Ph.D., at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.
- The Fifth Annual Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Award for International Collaboration in Cancer Research will be presented to Judith A. Varner, Ph.D., at the University of California, San Diego.
- The Third Annual Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Award for Research in Personalized Cancer Medicine will be presented to Sameek Roychowdhury, M.D., Ph.D., at the University of Michigan.

The AACR will honor the award recipients at a grants reception and dinner on Tuesday, April 3, 2012, at 6:30 p.m. CT in the Adams Foyer and Room at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago.

The Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Awards, established in 2008, are designed to foster innovation and collaboration in cancer research and support independent investigators early in their careers. The awards provide the recipients with the recognition they need to further their careers and possibly leverage additional funding.

The AACR and the Landon Foundation shifted from presenting two annual scientific achievement awards to presenting research grant funding in 2009. This was in an effort to refocus attention on younger researchers and recognize the critical need to identify and support the next generation of top cancer researchers as a way of facilitating breakthroughs in treatment and prevention.

The Landon Foundation-AACR partnership continues with these INNOVATOR Awards, which honor pioneers in cancer research. Prior to 2011, three prevention, three international collaboration and one personalized medicine awards were given. Combined with the previous scientific achievement awards, the total contribution of the Landon Foundation-AACR partnership is now close to $4 million.

Awardees each receive a two-year grant for $100,000 over the grant term.

2012 Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Award for Cancer Prevention Research

The INNOVATOR Award for Cancer Prevention Research supports a junior faculty researcher conducting research in any discipline of cancer prevention.

Peng's project is titled "Targeting the DNA repair network as a novel approach for cancer prevention." A constant challenge for researchers involved in cancer prevention research is the ability to identify preventive methods or treatments that have proven efficacy and safety. One such prevention strategy is the use of chemopreventive agents, which are employed to help prevent or delay the onset of cancers. Chemopreventive therapies aim to target and kill premalignant cells containing genetic alterations before they can progress to becoming cancerous and without damaging neighboring, normal cells.

In her research, Peng is taking a new approach to chemoprevention by targeting the DNA repair network of cancerous cells. DNA repair mechanisms play a critical role in cellular responses that occur once a premalignant or malignant cell is under replication or cellular stress. The predominant DNA lesions caused by this replication stress are double-strand DNA breaks. In order for a cell to counteract and survive these double-strand DNA breaks, they require a coordinated effort of DNA repair mechanisms. One such means of repair is termed homologous recombination (HR).

Peng's research objective is to identify therapies that will inhibit proteins involved in HR-mediated DNA repair, in turn promoting cell death for premalignant cells that are experiencing replication stress. These inhibitors will be developed and tested through the use of available cell lines and through the use of animal models. If Peng is able to discover and optimize drugs capable of inhibiting HR repair and proves that cells under replication stress are more sensitive to these treatments, this novel approach will expand the field of preventive treatment strategies by offering a molecular means by which to specifically target premalignant cells for death.

2012 Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Award for International Collaboration in Cancer Research

The Award for International Collaboration in Cancer Research supports an established international cancer research collaboration involving institutes in multiple countries by supplementing existing funding and providing the means to facilitate travel, training in new techniques and the dissemination of the scientific knowledge gained from the collaboration.

Varner's project, "Targeting tumor inflammation: A new approach to treat pancreatic cancer," will be part of a continuing international collaboration between U.S. and Italian-based laboratories to explore the role of inflammation in ductal adenocarcinoma of the pancreas (PDAC), a disease associated with a poor five-year survival rate that will affect more than 40,000 Americans in 2012.

In recent years, research has established that inflammation may be a contributing factor to tumor development and progression, resulting in increased research efforts to develop therapeutic drugs and strategies adapted to combat inflammation and inflammatory responses. Recently, Varner and her colleagues at Emilio Hirsch's laboratory at the Molecular Biotechnology Center, School of Medicine, University of Torino, in Italy discovered that PI3-kinase gamma (PI3Kγ) regulates tumor inflammation within myeloid cells, partially by recruiting factors that contribute to angiogenesis (formation of new blood vessels) and overall tumor survival. Varner hypothesizes that targeting this protein may help suppress pancreatic tumor growth and metastasis by preventing PI3Kγ-mediated angiogenesis and immunosuppression in the pancreas.

This grant supports this ongoing international cancer research collaboration that continues to evaluate whether PI3Kγ inhibitors can successfully target pancreatic cancer cells in animal models of PDAC and whether such inhibitors can block myeloid-induced immunosuppression during pancreatic cancer onset and progression.

2012 Landon Foundation-AACR INNOVATOR Award for Research in Personalized Cancer Medicine

The Award for Research in Personalized Cancer Medicine, now in its third year, provides support for a physician-scientist who conducts meritorious studies that hold promise for near-term patient benefit to accelerate progress in the area of personalized cancer medicine.

Roychowdhury will be working on the project "Mechanisms of resistance in prostate cancer through integrative sequencing." An increased interest in high-throughput sequencing of cancer genomes has led to an expanding molecular classification of prostate cancer, the most common type of cancer in men. Researchers hope that further exploration and characterization of molecular pathways associated with common cancers will help to identify the genetic mechanisms of resistance due to currently employed drug therapies.

Roychowdhury proposes to apply genetic sequencing strategies to prostate cancer patients in an effort to identify mechanisms of drug resistance and ultimately better inform treatment decision-making in the clinic.

Roychowdhury proposes to establish high-throughput sequencing regimes for patients with advanced prostate cancer (otherwise known as castration-resistant prostate cancer) in an attempt to establish a better understanding of the inherent and acquired genetic aberrations that contribute to the disease. To assist in this endeavor, Roychowdhury has established a multi-disciplinary Sequencing Tumor Board consisting of experts from medical oncology, pathology, bioinformatics, genomics and bioethics. These experts will collaborate to manage the results of the proposed sequencing experiments, interpret the produced data and hopefully locate the molecular contributors to drug resistance. These findings will also lead to the identification and development of potential drug therapies.

Roychowdhury's research will represent the first attempt at integrative sequencing in prostate cancer and will hopefully result in expansion of the molecular classification of the disease. If successful, researchers could subsequently apply the use of high-throughput sequencing within other clinical trials to further classify the molecular nature of disease progression and drug resistance in other cancer areas.

Press registration for the AACR Annual Meeting 2012 is free to qualified journalists and public information officers: www.aacr.org/PressRegistration [2].

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About the AACR

Founded in 1907, the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) is the world's first and largest professional organization dedicated to advancing cancer research and its mission to prevent and cure cancer. AACR's membership includes 34,000 laboratory, translational and clinical researchers; population scientists; other health care professionals; and cancer advocates residing in more than 90 countries. The AACR marshals the full spectrum of expertise of the cancer community to accelerate progress in the prevention, biology, diagnosis and treatment of cancer by annually convening more than 20 conferences and educational workshops, the largest of which is the AACR Annual Meeting with more than 18,000 attendees. In addition, the AACR publishes seven peer-reviewed scientific journals and a magazine for cancer survivors, patients and their caregivers. The AACR funds meritorious research directly as well as in cooperation with numerous cancer organizations. As the Scientific Partner of Stand Up To Cancer, the AACR provides expert peer review, grants administration and scientific oversight of individual and team science grants in cancer research that have the potential for patient benefit. The AACR actively communicates with legislators and policymakers about the value of cancer research and related biomedical science in saving lives from cancer.

For more information about the AACR, visit www.AACR.org [6].

About the Kirk A. & Dorothy P. Landon Foundation

The Kirk A. and Dorothy P. Landon Foundation was created through a bequest from Mrs. Dorothy P. Landon whose intent, along with that of her late husband, Kirk A. Landon, was to dedicate a major portion of their estate to medical research, especially research related to cancer. Mr. R. Kirk Landon, son of Kirk A. Landon, serves as the president of the foundation. The foundation seeks to accomplish its cancer research mission through a variety of programs and initiatives, including the Landon-AACR INNOVATOR Awards.

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