Pioneering Yale immunologist Ruslan Medzhitov receives inaugural NIH award

Yale UniversityYale University

Renowned Yale immunologist Ruslan Medzhitov has been awarded the inaugural Lurie Prize in the Biomedical Sciences from the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health (FNIH). The award, which honors early-career researchers whose findings have advanced basic biomedical science, was given to Medzhitov for his groundbreaking discoveries about the workings of the innate immune system, the body's first line of defense against bacteria and viruses.

A jury of scientists, headed by Dr. Solomon Snyder of Johns Hopkins University, selected Medzhitov from a group of 154 nominees. The award, which carries an honorarium of $100,000, will be presented to Medzhitov at a ceremony on Tuesday, May 14 in Chicago.

Medzhitov, the David W. Wallace Professor of Immunobiology and a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator, came to Yale in 1994 as a postdoctoral fellow in the lab of Charles Janeway. The two researchers made the groundbreaking discovery that a human toll-like receptor (TLR), a component of the innate system, provides the adaptive system with the necessary information to create custom-made B and T

cells that target specific bacterial or viral invaders, through recognition of basic molecular patterns shared by microbial pathogens. Since then, toll-like receptors have become the subject of intense research activity in laboratories around the world.

“Dr. Medzhitov’s painstaking studies paved the way for the identification of multiple TLR family members and their respective ligands, which help bind molecules forming larger complexes, advancing the entire field of immunology and opening the way for the development of new vaccines and treatments,” Snyder said. “He is a true pioneer of medical science.”

The Lurie Prize is the first of its kind to specifically recognize young scientists – under the age of 52 – who have changed the field of biomedical research. It was established by philanthropist Ann Lurie and reflects her passion for advancing biomedical research and medical care. “My specific interest is to reward and acknowledge a scientist who makes a discovery that is clearly a game changer in terms of medical and biological research,” said Lurie.

“This is award is a tremendous honor, and I am very grateful to all my colleagues, teachers and trainees,” Medzhitov said. “I am especially grateful to the FNIH and its scientific jury for recognizing the tremendous progress in the field of innate immunity to which so many of my colleagues have contributed.”

Medzhitov was nominated for the Lurie award by his Yale colleague Richard Flavell, Sterling Professor of Immunobiology, chairman of the department, and also a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator.

Medzhitov, a member of Yale Cancer Center, was one of three scientists awarded the prestigious Shaw Prize in Life Science and Medicine for 2011. In April, 2010, he received one of the highest honors bestowed on American scientists when he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the elite corps of researchers from the nation’s top scientific institutions.

In December, 2009, Medzhitov won the 2010 Lewis S. Rosenstiel Award for Distinguished Work in Basic Medical Science for his “elucidation of the mechanisms of innate immunity,” according to the Rosenstiel Center. Medzhitov’s studies helped shed light on the critical role of toll-like receptors in sensing microbial infections, mechanisms of TLR signaling, and activation of the inflammatory and immune response.

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