Rino Rappuoli receives Robert Koch Award 2019

Robert Koch Gold Medal goes to Martin J. Blaser

Berlin – The Robert Koch Foundation today awarded the 2019 Robert Koch Award, with an endowment of 120,000 euros, to Professor Rino Rappuoli, Chief Scientist and Head of External Research and Development (R&D) at GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) Vaccines in Siena, Italy.

Professor Martin J. Blaser, Director of the Center for Advanced Biotechnology and Medicine (CABM) at Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS), Henry Rutgers Chair of the Human Microbiome and Professor of Medicine and Microbiology at the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey (US), was presented with the Robert Koch Gold Medal for his life’s work.

Dr. Thomas Steffen, State Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Health, presented the awards at a ceremony held at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Rappuoli received the Robert Koch Award for his ground-breaking work on the development of novel vaccines. In his laudatory speech, Professor Peter Palese, Professor of Microbiology and the Chair of the Department of Microbiology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, honored Rappuoli’s achievements: “Rino Rappuoli has written medical history with a new method for producing vaccines. He successfully transferred basic science knowledge towards commercial vaccine products and has thus succeeded where many scientists failed.”

Professor Lothar H. Wieler, President of the Robert Koch Institute, highlighted Gold Medal laureate Martin J. Blaser’s achievements: “His research interest lies in better understanding the relationship between microorganisms and the humans that serve them as a permanent host. For him, the responsible use of antibiotics is a major concern, because his research indicates significant health consequences from the misuse of antibiotics in the critical stages of child development. This abuse destroys parts of our original microbiome, and this is a risk factor for the development of various diseases, such as asthma or obesity.”

Post-doctoral awards for young scientists

Also presented at the ceremony were the Post-doctoral Awards for outstanding work by young scientists, which are each endowed with prize money of 5,000 euros. The candidates were nominated by the German Societies for Hygiene and Microbiology, Immunology and Virology.

Dr. Henning Grüll, Institute of Virology, Cologne University Hospital, received the Post-doctoral Award for Virology in recognition of his work on HIV infection. Grüll specializes in the study of basic immunological principles for the effective prevention and treatment of viral infections. He examines the immune response to infectious pathogens and has discovered new principles for HIV-1 vaccines and therapies.

Dr. Anna Müller, Institute for Pharmaceutical Microbiology, University of Bonn, received the Post-doctoral Award for Microbiology for her work on anti-infective research. Among other things, she has discovered that daptomycin alters the...
membrane fluidity and that pichloroacid epimerases are very good targets for antibiotics. Daptomycin is one of the most effective antibacterial substances on the market and is mainly used to treat Gram-positive problematic germs such as MRSA. However, the exact mechanism of action of the antibiotic was unclear for a long time. Müller’s research has shown that daptomycin inter alia messes up the lipid organization of the membrane. It modifies the fluid membrane regions in such a way that some proteins can no longer bind to the membrane and detach from it.

The Post-doctoral Award for Immunology went to Dr. Daniel Utzschneider, The Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, University of Melbourne, Australia, in recognition of his work on T cell immunology. Utzschneider’s work deals with the T cell immune response, in particular the development and exhaustion of memory T cells in acute and chronic viral infections such as lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV). He has ushered in a paradigm shift in the field of T cell immunology. He described and demonstrated a new model in which T cells undergo differentiation and functional specialization processes in chronic infections. He showed that T cells lose certain functional aspects in a chronic infection while preserving critical functional aspects.

Photos from the award ceremony may be downloaded for editorial use at: www.robert-koch-stiftung.de/award-ceremony2019
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About the Robert Koch Foundation

The Robert Koch Foundation is a non-profit foundation dedicated to the promotion of medical progress. It was founded in 1907 and is based in Berlin. The Foundation promotes basic scientific research in the field of infectious diseases, as well as exemplary projects that address medical and hygienic issues.

The Foundation confers a number of distinguished scientific awards each year: the Robert Koch Award – one of Germany’s most distinguished scientific awards, the Robert Koch Gold Medal, three awards for young scientists and, since 2013, the Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention Award.

Robert Koch (1843 – 1910), after whom the award is named, was the founder of modern-day bacteriology, for which he was awarded the 1905 Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology. From 1891 until his retirement in 1904, Koch was Head of the Institute for Infectious Diseases in Berlin.

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