

Nobel Prize for Medicine Awarded to Harald zur Hausen

Harald zur Hausen is awarded the Nobel Medicine Prize. Zur Hausen, former Scientific Director of the German Cancer Research Center, a member of the Helmholtz Association, is recognized for finding that cervical cancer is caused by viral infections. His research made it possible to develop a vaccine against the third most frequent cancer in women. Zur Hausen wins one half of the prize; the other half is shared by Françoise Barré-Sinoussi and Luc Montagnier for discovering HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

More than three decades ago, zur Hausen already suspected that there is a connection between human papillomavirus (HPV) infections and cervical cancer. In the early 1980s, the scientist and his team were the first to isolate virus types HPV 16 and HPV 18 from a cervical cancer tissue sample.

“We are tremendously proud. Proud of Harald zur Hausen, of his excellent scientific achievement. We are proud that he was able to make a substantial contribution to cancer prevention through his work and his diligence. Harald zur Hausen put forward a hypothesis that was totally new at the time. He verified this hypothesis thoroughly and has achieved enormous progress for the health of women,” said Professor Dr. Otmar D. Wiestler, Scientific Director of the German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ). His colleague Dr. Josef Puchta, Administrative-Commercial Director of DKFZ, adds: “This prize is awarded for Harald zur Hausen’s outstanding life’s work. Together with him, we are happy to witness how a scientific idea has made its way to medical application within this researcher’s life.”

The vaccine that was developed on the basis of the fundamental research of zur Hausen’s laboratory has recently been approved for use in Germany. It is an excellent example of successful technology transfer from basic research.

Zur Hausen, born in 1936 in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, studied medicine. After receiving his doctoral degree, he worked at the Institute of Medical Microbiology of the University of Düsseldorf. He then moved to the Virus Laboratories of the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. Zur Hausen qualified as a professor at the University of Würzburg in 1969. In 1972, he accepted the chair of Clinical Virology at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg and subsequently, in 1977, the chair of Virology and Hygiene at the University of Freiburg. From 1983 to 2003 Harald zur Hausen was Chairman and Scientific Member of the Management Board of the German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) in Heidelberg.

Under zur Hausen’s directorship, the German Cancer Research Center expanded its collaboration with university hospitals. Clinical Cooperation Units were established to interlock basic research and clinical medicine so as to ensure swift transfer of research results into practice.

Harald zur Hausen has been awarded numerous prizes, including the 2006 Prince Mahidol Award and the 2007 German Cancer Aid Prize. He is a recipient of the Great Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The task of the Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum in Heidelberg (German Cancer Research Center, DKFZ) is to systematically investigate the mechanisms of cancer development and to identify cancer risk factors. The results of this basic research are expected to lead to new approaches in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of

cancer. The Center is financed to 90 percent by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and to 10 percent by the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg. It is a member of the Helmholtz Association of National Research Centers (Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft Deutscher Forschungszentren e.V.).