

PRESS RELEASE

One million Swiss francs for four research projects on rare cancers

Thun, 26.10. 2016 – This year's Swiss Bridge Award goes to two researchers from Belgium and two researchers from Switzerland. Jan Cools, Pieter Van Vlierberghe, Christian Mosimann and Sara Meyer each receive 250 000 Swiss francs for the realization of their research projects.

The Swiss Bridge Foundation has doubled the award sum this year on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. This year, the award is dedicated to the study of rare cancers. These diseases affect less than six out of 100 000 people – and not only are they insufficiently researched, but they are often also difficult to treat.

An overall total of 226 researchers applied for the Swiss Bridge Award with their own project proposals. A thirteen-member jury consisting of renowned experts implemented a two-step evaluation procedure. Their final decision was made to distinguish two research projects from Belgium, as well as two projects from Switzerland; with 250 000 Swiss francs awarded to each project. The awards ceremony shall take place today in the Schadau Castle, Thun.

Analysis of Disease-relevant Processes

Both projects from Belgium are focussing on acute lymphoblastic leukaemia from T-cells, the so-called T-ALL, a rare form of leukaemia. There has been significant progress made in T-ALL treatment over the last 50 years. Today approximately eight out of ten people, most of whom are young patients, can be successfully treated. However, still twenty percent of leukaemia cases in children, as well as many older patients have bleak prospects. Jan Cools and his research team at the University of Leuven aim to identify new treatment approaches through an in-depth analysis of the various disease-relevant processes within degenerated T-cells.

The team led by Pieter Van Vlierberghe at Ghent University is interested first and foremost in epigenetic processes that play a role in the formation and development of blood cancer cells. These researchers have recently shown that the survival of leukemic cells can be prevented by targeting a protein known as LSD1 with an active substance. This protein affects the packaging density of the genetic material in the cell nucleus, and thus, which genes are transcribed. With his new project, Van Vlierberghe builds upon previous results and explores the therapeutic potential of LSD1 inhibitors.

Similarities between Human Beings and Zebra Fish

In Switzerland, the project from Christian Mosimann and his group at the University of Zurich has raced to the top. This team of researchers examines the molecular formation mechanisms of chordomas. These are rare and slow-growing tumours which develop from the vestiges of the so-called notochord – the embryonic predecessor of the spinal column. Mosimann's team has found that the chordomas of zebra fish are quite similar to those of human beings in many aspects – and they would now like to use this animal model in a new project to decode the disease incidence and to identify possible therapeutic targets.

Last but not least, the project from Sara Meyer and her team at the University Hospital Basel is also among the winners of the Swiss Bridge Award. These researchers are tracking the processes to distinguish myeloproliferative neoplasms. These are rare, chronic diseases of the haematopoietic system which can degenerate into acute myeloid leukaemia. Meyer and her group have identified in previous work that the diseased cells exhibit redundant signalling pathways, which unfortunately lead to the often observed treatment failures. In their project, the researchers examine whether a treatment which simultaneously interrupts two complementary signalling pathways may be more effective.

The Swiss Bridge Foundation was founded 20 years ago upon the initiative of Mr. Thomas Hoepli, Swiss Bridge's former Managing Director and current Foundation Board Member, with the support of the Swiss Cancer League. Its goal is to support qualitatively high grade research projects with the help of private donors and foundations in the fight against cancer. Since the Foundation's inception, Swiss Bridge has received more than 30 Million Swiss francs in donations – so that research projects can be supported in Belgium, Brazil, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

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