

JANUARY 24, 2012

World-Class Scientists Chosen for HHMI's First International Early Career Award

Top biomedical scientists from 12 countries will receive an important boost at a critical time in their careers from HHMI's inaugural International Early Career Scientist (IECS) awards.

The 28 recipients, chosen from 760 applicants, represent a wide range of disciplines, from neuroscience to virology to plant science. All the awardees trained in the United States as a graduate student or a postdoctoral fellow and have published important research. "These are the people who, 10 years from now, we expect will be the scientific leaders in their countries," HHMI President Robert Tjian says.

The countries with the most IECS awardees are China (7), Portugal (5), and Spain (5), but recipients are also based in nine other countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, South Africa, and South Korea. Nine of the 28 (32 percent) are women.

"We want their association with HHMI to have a significant impact on their careers," says Jack E. Dixon, HHMI's vice president and chief scientific officer. "It is important to have highly educated, effective scholars around the world, and we want to help those people build successful labs."

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These researchers—who have all run their own labs for less than seven years—will be integrated into HHMI's scientific community, attending meetings and giving talks to HHMI's investigators and early career scientists. HHMI funds 327 HHMI investigators and 48 early career scientists who direct laboratories at universities and research organizations throughout the

United States. Among them are 13 Nobel Prize winners and 147 members of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

“This program is about building connections internationally,” says Edwin W. McCleskey, a scientific officer at HHMI who helps run the IECS program. “We have chosen talented people who we feel can build connections with our scientists.”

International programs are an important focus of the Institute, and Tjian was especially interested in strengthening ties to international labs given the worldwide connections of HHMI’s scientists. A June 2010 survey by HHMI of its investigators and early career scientists showed that 73 percent of those who responded collaborate internationally, and 62 percent have international postdoctoral students in their laboratories.

“Some young scientists really want to succeed in the scientific arena but see no opportunity to do that in their own countries,” Tjian says. “We hope this program will help change that.”

The 28 IECS awardees will each receive \$650,000: \$100,000 a year for five years plus \$150,000 the first year for major equipment purchases and other investments (an additional supplement will go to their university or research institution). This represents a total commitment by HHMI of more than \$20 million. The funding will start in February 2012.

The IECS program is the latest incarnation of HHMI’s international grants to individual researchers. Since 1991, HHMI has spent more than \$145 million to fund international scientists working in specific geographic areas—including Canada, Latin America, and Eastern Europe—or in a specific field of research, such as parasitology and infectious disease.

When it came time to rethink those grants, Tjian and Dixon decided to design a program that provided support for early career scientists who would benefit most from a financial boost and the connection with HHMI’s scientific community. The research arena for early career scientists can be challenging internationally. For example, funding to help new scientists start up their labs can be quite variable, and often much less is available than in the United States.

Tjian and Dixon also decided to home in on countries where HHMI’s funding or connections could make the most difference. They thought HHMI support wouldn’t make much difference in countries where research funds are already plentiful, but they realized that not all countries make science a priority. “We chose countries that had the economic and educational infrastructure to support the level of science that we’re talking about, which is very expensive,” Tjian says.

Scientists from 18 countries were eligible to apply, and HHMI received 760 applications. A rigorous peer-review process narrowed the field to 55 semifinalists from 14 countries. For the first time, HHMI invited the semifinalists to give a 15-minute scientific presentation as part of the selection process. They delivered their talks to an international panel of scientific reviewers at a symposium in early November 2011 at HHMI's Janelia Farm Research Campus in Ashburn, Virginia.

“The major criterion was really scientific excellence: what have they accomplished in their young careers; what kind of potential did they have; could they explain their science in a clear way,” Dixon says. See a bio of each awardee [here](#).

The IECS program is just one part of HHMI's current international efforts. In 2009, HHMI committed \$60 million to build a new research institute in Durban, South Africa, the KwaZulu-Natal Research Institute for Tuberculosis and HIV (K-RITH), dedicated to studying the deadly co-epidemics of HIV and tuberculosis. The Institute also funds International Student Research Fellowships to support international graduate students doing research at U.S. universities.

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