

Media Contact: Deborah Wormser
214-648-3404
deborah.wormser@utsouthwestern.edu

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UT Southwestern scientist awarded inaugural Antonio M. Gotto Jr. Prize

DALLAS – March 26, 2012 – Dr. Helen Hobbs, a preeminent researcher who studies the genetics of cholesterol metabolism at UT Southwestern Medical Center, has won a prestigious award from the International Atherosclerosis Society.

Dr. Hobbs, director of the Eugene McDermott Center for Human Growth and Development and a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator, will receive the inaugural Antonio M. Gotto Jr. Prize in Atherosclerosis Research today at the society's meeting in Sydney.

Her research focuses on identifying genetic factors that contribute to variations in the levels of cholesterol in the blood, especially low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol. Elevated levels of LDL cholesterol in the blood increase the risk of a heart attack.

Since 1999 Dr. Hobbs has led the Dallas Heart Study, a longitudinal, multiethnic, population-based study of risk factors underlying cardiovascular disease. The study, funded by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, involves thousands of participants.

In research done with colleague Dr. Jonathan Cohen, professor of internal medicine, Dr. Hobbs identified people with a genetic mutation that kept them from making normal amounts of the PCSK9 protein. Those with the mutation have a 28 percent reduction in LDL cholesterol levels and an 88 percent reduction in risk of coronary heart disease over a 15-year period compared to those without the mutation.

"This is a greater reduction in heart disease than expected based on the statin trials," she said. "This finding reflects the fact that atherosclerosis is a chronic disease that takes years to develop. Individuals with a mutation in PCSK9 have had lower cholesterol levels their entire lives and consequently have less heart disease."

An editorial in the March 22 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* credited their work with "spurring interest in PCSK9 therapeutics," which now are under development by several pharmaceutical companies.

A UT Southwestern faculty member since 1987, Dr. Hobbs majored in human biology at Stanford University and then earned her medical degree at Case Western Reserve University School of
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Medicine in Cleveland. The Boston native completed an internship in internal medicine at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City before moving in 1980 to Dallas and UT Southwestern, where she finished her clinical training and served as chief resident in internal medicine at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Hobbs made the transition from full-time clinician to physician-scientist at the urging of her UT Southwestern mentors, Nobel laureates Dr. Michael Brown, director of the Erik Jonsson Center for Research in Molecular Genetics and Human Disease, and Dr. Joseph Goldstein, chairman of molecular genetics. Drs. Brown and Goldstein shared the 1985 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine for their discovery of the basic mechanism of cholesterol metabolism. Beginning in 1983, Dr. Hobbs spent four years as a postdoctoral research fellow in their laboratory before joining the faculty.

Dr. Hobbs was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2007, to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2006, and to the National Academy's Institute of Medicine in 2004. Her many recognitions and honors include the first Clinical Research Prize in 2005 from the American Heart Association, the Heinrich Wieland Prize from Germany, and the 2007 AHA Distinguished Scientist Award.

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