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UT Southwestern molecular biologist wins prestigious NAS award

DALLAS – Feb. 8, 2012 – Dr. Zhijian “James” Chen, professor of molecular biology and Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigator at UT Southwestern Medical Center, has been named the recipient of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Award in Molecular Biology for 2012.

In the prize announcement NAS officials noted that Dr. Chen was “honored for two contributions important for cancer and immunity: discovering an unsuspected component in a central signaling pathway and identifying an unprecedented role for a subcellular organelle in fighting viral infection.”

Dr. Chen, a UT Southwestern faculty member since 1997, said, “This is a moment to reflect on the contributions of many talented and hardworking students, research fellows and staff in my laboratory. It is also an opportunity to express my gratitude to my colleagues and the leadership at UT Southwestern for many years of strong support. The culture on this campus is very special and I am extremely honored that the work in my laboratory is recognized by the National Academy and deemed worthy of such a prestigious award.”

Sponsored by Pfizer Inc., the award includes a \$25,000 prize to recognize a recent notable discovery by an early-career scientist. Dr. Chen will be honored in a ceremony on April 30 during the NAS’ 149th annual meeting.

“This award recognizes the exceptional accomplishments of Dr. Chen, who has applied powerful techniques of molecular biology to understand the fundamental mechanisms of cell response to viral infections. We are extremely fortunate to count him as a member of our faculty,” said Dr. Daniel K. Podolsky, president of UT Southwestern.

In 2005, Dr. Chen received the Norman Hackerman Award in Chemical Research from the Robert A. Welch Foundation.

In 2007, Dr. Chen received the Edith and Peter O’Donnell Award in Science from the Academy of Medicine, Engineering and Science of Texas.

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Dr. Chen's research focuses on cellular signaling in the immune system, particularly the protein ubiquitin, so named because it is ubiquitously, or universally, found in all cells.

Ubiquitin's best-known role is to mark other proteins for destruction by the cell. But Dr. Chen identified another very different role. He found that certain proteins in the cell, when tagged with ubiquitin, were activated instead of being destroyed. Once turned on by this chemical tag, proteins send signals inside the cell that regulate growth and other essential functions.

In addition Dr. Chen has found that mitochondria – intracellular organelles that produce energy – also contribute to the body's immune response. Both of Dr. Chen's discoveries are important for understanding the fundamental mechanisms of cancer and immunity, and they identify potential new targets for the development of drugs to fight infection by common viruses such as hepatitis C, West Nile and influenza.

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A short video from Dr. Chen's O'Donnell Award ceremony can be viewed at:
<http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/life-at/video/james-chen-unexpected-tasks.html>

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