UT SOUTHWESTERN MEDICAL CENTER NEWS

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UT Southwestern faculty members named Howard Hughes investigators

DALLAS – May 27, 2008 – Three researchers who originally joined the UT Southwestern Medical Center faculty as part of the institution's acclaimed Endowed Scholars Program in Medical Science are among 56 distinguished biomedical scientists nationwide who today were named Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigators.

Dr. Lora Hooper, assistant professor of immunology, Dr. Youxing Jiang, assistant professor of physiology, and Dr. Hongtao Yu, associate professor of pharmacology, were named in a national competition by the institute, a philanthropic organization that promotes biomedical research.

Their appointments bring the number of HHMI investigators who are UT Southwestern faculty members to 13.

All three of the new HHMI investigators joined the UT Southwestern faculty as Endowed Scholars. That program was established in 1998 with $60 million in philanthropic funds to attract and retain the best and brightest medical investigators at the inception of their careers. Each receives four-year start-up funding to enable exploration and expansion of original ideas.

"To have three of our outstanding young researchers named among the 56 new HHMI awardees is incredibly important," said Dr. Kern Wildenthal, president of UT Southwestern. "Their selection is an honor for them, and the fact that we have more than 5 percent of the individuals chosen in this extremely rigorous national competition that involved hundreds of institutions is a great honor for our medical center as well. We are extremely grateful for the private philanthropy that enabled us to bring these talented investigators to UT Southwestern and launch their careers here."

One of the nation's largest philanthropies, HHMI has in the past two decades invested more than $8.3 billion for the support, training and education of the country's most creative and promising scientists. HHMI investigators are selected from among faculties of universities and academic medical centers around the country, and conduct research in such topics as cell biology, computational biology, genetics, immunology, neuroscience and structural biology. Once selected, investigators continue to be based at their home institutions, typically leading their own research group, but become HHMI employees.

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The 42 men and 14 women selected this year are from 31 medical schools, universities and research institutions nationwide, including one each at the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University. The only other medical school to have three new awardees was Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Hooper joined the UT Southwestern faculty in 2003 as the Nancy Cain and Jeffrey A. Marcus Scholar in Medical Research, in Honor of Dr. Bill S. Vowell. She received her doctorate in molecular cell biology and biochemistry from Washington University in St. Louis, where she also completed a postdoctoral fellowship.

Her research centers on host-microbial interactions, including how microbes – especially the hundreds of species of bacteria in the human gut – help to shape the development and function of the immune system. Dr. Hooper's work has applications in the search for novel ways to fight infections due to the growing number of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Her research has shown, for example, that it may be possible to improve a person's resistance to certain infections just by increasing the numbers of particular beneficial microbes in the intestines.

"I am tremendously honored to have been selected as a new HHMI investigator," Dr. Hooper said. "This funding will allow my lab to take on a number of challenging new research directions with high potential impact. UT Southwestern provides both a collaborative environment and a standard of scientific excellence that makes it the ideal place to take on these new challenges."

Dr. Jiang, a W.W. Caruth Jr. Scholar in Biomedical Research, also joined the faculty in 2003. He earned a doctorate in chemistry from Yale University and completed his postdoctoral work in molecular neurobiology and biophysics at Rockefeller University.

Dr. Jiang's research has focused on determining the structure and function of ion channels, which are proteins found in cell membranes that allow various ions to pass into and out of cells. Such channels are crucial for many physiological processes, including the generation of electrical impulses in cells. His work provides crucial insight into understanding how these channels excite nerve and muscle cells.

"I feel honored to be selected as an HHMI investigator, as it is a major recognition of the quality of the research performed in my laboratory," Dr. Jiang said. "The support from HHMI will allow me to focus on my research and tackle more and more challenging problems in my field. I would like to acknowledge the scientific community at UT Southwestern, especially my departmental colleagues, who

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have made this a wonderful environment in which to perform high-quality research."

Dr. Yu is the Michael L. Rosenberg Scholar in Medical Research. A native of China, he received his bachelor's degree in chemistry from Peking University in Beijing and his doctorate in chemistry from Harvard University. He was a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard Medical School before coming to UT Southwestern in 1999.

Researchers in Dr. Yu's laboratory take a multidisciplinary approach to study the mechanism of chromosome inheritance. Using a combination of cell biological, biochemical and biophysical methods, Dr. Yu studies the mechanisms that determine how a dividing cell equally distributes chromosomes between the two "daughter" cells. These studies could help explain why cancer cells usually have abnormal numbers of chromosomes.

"I am thrilled to have been selected as an investigator in the Howard Hughes Medical Institute," Dr. Yu said. "This funding will help us more seamlessly integrate methods from different disciplines into our research program and move our research in new directions."

In addition to the three announced today, HHMI investigators at UT Southwestern are Dr. Zhijian "James" Chen, professor of molecular biology; Dr. Johann Deisenhofer, professor of biochemistry; Dr. Nick V. Grishin, associate professor of biochemistry; Dr. Helen Hobbs, director of the Eugene McDermott Center for Human Growth and Development and chief of clinical genetics; Dr. Beth Levine, chief of infectious diseases; Dr. David J. Mangelsdorf, chairman of pharmacology; Dr. Michael K. Rosen, professor of biochemistry; Dr. Thomas C. Südhof, chairman of neuroscience; Dr. Xiaodong Wang, professor of biochemistry; and Dr. Masashi Yanagisawa, professor of molecular genetics.

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