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UT Southwestern's Olson wins prestigious French award for heart research

DALLAS – June 4, 2009 – Dr. Eric Olson, chairman of molecular biology at UT Southwestern Medical Center, has been awarded the Institut de France's prestigious Lefoulon-Delalande Foundation Grand Prize for his work on gene regulation in the cardiovascular system.

The prize has an international reputation as the most prestigious award in cardiovascular research. The award of about \$664,000 (500,000 euros) will be presented June 10 in France by French Prime Minister Francois Fillon and the president of the Institut de France.

"I consider this award one of the highest honors of my career," Dr. Olson said. "It's a wonderful recognition of the many scientists in my lab from throughout the United States and around the world who have contributed to this effort. They really deserve the credit."

Much of what is known regarding cardiac gene regulation can be traced directly to Dr. Olson's pioneering work. His research is regarded as a major step in finding genetic targets for treatment of congenital heart defects and adult heart disease, and it has illuminated the fundamental principles of organ formation. Equally important is his demonstration that many of the genes that control heart formation are called into play in the adult heart under pathological stress.

"Dr. Olson's discoveries have provided profound new insights into cardiac development and substantially advanced our understanding of altered cardiovascular function in disease," said Dr. Daniel K. Podolsky, president of UT Southwestern. "Dr. Olson exemplifies the scientific creativity of our faculty which serves as the foundation for UT Southwestern's international reputation as a center of research, discovery and innovation."

Dr. Olson studies how the heart and blood vessels form, how they rebuild themselves after injury, and how genetic mutations and stress can cause heart disease. He and his team have discovered networks of genes that orchestrate the formation of the heart and have shown how inherited genetic mutations in these genes cause congenital heart disease, the most frequent form of birth defect.

Most recently, Dr. Olson has turned his attention to distinctive forms of ribonucleic acid called microRNAs, chemical cousins of DNA, which are increasingly recognized to activate, turn off or fine-tune various functions in cells.

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Several novel therapeutics based on Dr. Olson's research are currently in development.

Dr. Olson is director of the Nancy B. and Jake L. Hamon Center for Basic Research in Cancer and the Nearburg Family Center for Basic Research in Pediatric Oncology. He holds the Pogue Distinguished Chair in Research on Cardiac Birth Defects, the Robert A. Welch Distinguished Chair in Science and the Annie and Willie Nelson Professorship in Stem Cell Research.

Dr. Olson is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He serves as a consultant to miRagen Therapeutics, a biotechnology company that he co-founded.

His numerous honors and awards include the Pollin Prize for Pediatric Research and the Pasarow Award in Cardiovascular Medicine. In addition, he received the Outstanding Investigator Award from the International Society for Heart Research and an inaugural Distinguished Scientist Award from the American Heart Association. He also was awarded the AHA's National Research Achievement Award for work that the organization described as having "redrawn battle lines in the fight against disease."

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