

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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PEDIATRICIAN RECEIVES PRESIDENT'S RESEARCH COUNCIL AWARD

DALLAS - June 4, 1996 - Dr. Robert O. Bash, assistant professor of pediatrics and a hematologist-oncologist at UT Southwestern Medical Center, has received the 1996 Distinguished Young Researcher Award.

The award is supported by the President's Research Council (PRC) members and is presented annually. Bash received the award at a June 4 dinner in his honor.

PRC co-chairs are Carole and Jim Young, and Chelen and Bill Moore are membership chairs. The PRC was established in 1984 by Cece Smith and Ford Lacy and is made up of community leaders who are interested in the advancement of science and medicine through research.

Bash is investigating the role the gene *TAL1* plays in childhood T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (T-ALL). T-ALL represents about 15 percent of childhood acute-lymphoblastic- leukemia cases. It is more common in adolescents than in young children and tends to be a very aggressive cancer. Only about half of T-ALL patients are cured.

The protein expressed by the *TAL1* gene is present in most cases of T-ALL, which suggests it is responsible for turning normal T-cells into malignant cells. *TAL1* also appears to affect the expression of proteins by other genes within a cell. Bash is attempting to identify and characterize the genes affected by *TAL1*.

"Learning how a normal T-cell becomes malignant as a result of *TAL1* will help us understand the exact biochemical and structural changes a normal cell goes through as it becomes malignant," Bash said.

A second goal of his work is to identify ways a drug could target a specific stage of *TAL1* expression that would arrest the malignant cells but have little or no affect on

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normal cells.

"This has the potential of boosting the effectiveness of anti-cancer chemotherapy while sharply reducing – or perhaps eliminating – the side effects associated with that treatment," Bash said.

Another major focus of his research is to use the alterations of the *TAL1* gene to monitor the risk of relapse in children with T-ALL. A test to monitor *TAL1* alterations could alert the treatment team to intervene before the patient has a full-blown relapse that is less likely to be treated successfully.

"Such tests also may help us predict which patients need less therapy thereby limiting the child's exposure to unneeded treatment and avoiding the side-effects of excessive chemotherapy," he said.

Bash received his undergraduate and medical degrees and his residency training at Indiana University. In 1989 he came to UT Southwestern for a pediatric hematology-oncology fellowship. In 1990 he joined the laboratory of Dr. Richard Baer, a UT Southwestern professor of microbiology who had co-discovered the *TAL1* gene a short time before. Baer holds the Roy and Christine Sturgis Chair in Biomedical Research and the H. Lloyd and Willye V. Skaggs Professorship in Medical Research, and his discovery gave direction to the young researcher.

Bash joined the UT Southwestern faculty in 1993. He has received the Lyman T. Meiks Award in Pediatrics and a Young Investigator Award from the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

At the annual PRC dinner, new members of the organization's steering committee were announced. The new members, whose terms extend from 1996-1999 are Susan Abramson, Cissy and W. Plack Carr Jr., Lee and William Shilling, Eliza Solender and Gary Scott, and Martha and Daniel Weston.

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