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Dr. Paul Liu named 2015 Distinguished Alumnus for contributions to leukemia research

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In his laboratory in the National Human Genome Research Institute in Bethesda, Md., Paul Liu, M.D., Ph.D., is working on targeted treatments for leukemia, a life-threatening blood cancer.

"These are our own cells but somehow we have lost control of them," said Liu, a 1991 graduate of The University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Houston. "We are using genetic tools to understand how these cancer cells propagate."

He has developed a way to regain control of those cells in mouse models and hopes to translate his preclinical work into patient treatments.

Liu was named the 2015 Distinguished Alumnus of the Graduate School for his contributions to biomedical science. The Graduate School is operated by The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) and The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

"We are delighted to be able to recognize Dr. Paul Liu as our 2015 Distinguished Alumnus. He has made outstanding contributions to our understanding of the genetic control of hematopoiesis and leukemia. He is an inspiration to us and to our students," said the school's joint deans - Michael Blackburn, Ph.D., and Michelle Barton, Ph.D. - in a statement.

Blackburn is the William S. Kilroy Sr. Chair in Pulmonary Disease and the John B. McGovern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences Distinguished Professor at UTHealth.

According to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, an estimated 327,520 people in the United States are living with leukemia.

"The challenge is that leukemia in each patient is different," said Liu, noting that the cause of leukemia is unknown. "You have to personalize patient treatments."

His interest in cancer research dates back to his days as a student in the Graduate School. "I remember talking to a hematologist named Dr. David Claxton about the need for a better understanding of leukemia, which would improve treatment."

Liu's mentor was Michael Siciliano, Ph.D., of MD Anderson and he introduced Liu to cancer genetics. "He was a fantastic mentor and taught me the principles of scientific research, especially in the field of cancer genetics," said Liu, who is from Beijing, China. "He also taught me about American life and baseball."

Liu recalled the students and professors in the laboratories playing softball.

"The Graduate School was my scientific home," said Liu, whose professors included Randy J. Legerski, Ph.D., of the Graduate School. "The classes were very useful and I picked up a lot of fundamental knowledge that I would use later."

Siciliano said, "Dr. Liu was the product of our special mission where we can apply basic research to biomedical problems."

Successful scientists are curious about how things work, Liu said. "You have to be interested in the work. You don't think of it as a career. It's not a 9 to 5 job. It is something you are devoted to," he said.

Liu joined the National Human Genome Research Institute in 1993 and was named its deputy scientific director in 2011.

"Dr. Liu is a truly distinguished physician-scientist who has made pioneering advances about important underpinnings of cancer. His creativity in blending together contemporary scientific approaches - from genomics to animal models - has allowed him to gain key insights about leukemia. His multi-decade record of scientific accomplishments is truly impressive," said Eric Green, M.D., Ph.D., director of the National Human Genome

Research Institute.

Liu's laboratory has a special interest in how genes control blood formation. When the blood formation process goes awry, the body produces large numbers of abnormal blood cells or leukemia cells.

He discovered a fusion gene that causes one type of leukemia, using patient samples from MD Anderson. In an animal model, he demonstrated how this fusion gene leads to leukemia development.

Liu, the son of a pharmacologist, received his medical degree from Capital Medical University in China and completed his postdoctoral research training at the University of Michigan.

He received a NIH Director's Award and was elected to the American Society for Clinical Investigation and the Association of American Physicians.

Liu and his wife, Yao-Yao Zhu, M.D., Ph.D., have two children: Sarah, 13, and Jonathan, 11. Liu said Sarah is interested in science and may one day follow in her father's footsteps at the Graduate School.

Source:

University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
