

Prizes honor studies in vision loss, obesity

September 21 2010, By MALCOLM RITTER , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- Three scientists have won prestigious medical prizes - one for devising a treatment for a major cause of vision loss and two for laying the groundwork for an explosion in obesity research.

The Lasker Awards, worth \$250,000 apiece, will be presented Oct. 1 by the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation. A fourth scientist is being honored for decades of statesmanship in biomedical sciences.

The clinical research award goes to Dr. Napoleone Ferrara, 54, of the biotech company Genentech in South San Francisco, Calif. He is honored for discovering a protein called VEGF in 1989 and using it to develop a treatment that significantly improves sight for people with a devastating type of age-related [macular degeneration](#).

More than a million people worldwide have been treated based on Ferrara's research, the Lasker foundation says. The type of age-related macular degeneration his research addressed - "wet" as opposed to the more common "dry" form - accounts for a tenth or more of the 25 million to 30 million cases of AMD worldwide.

Two drugs based on Ferrara's VEGF research, Lucentis and the cancer medicine Avastin, are used for wet AMD, attacking it by discouraging the formation of an abnormal growth of blood vessels behind the retina.

The Lasker prize for basic research is shared by Douglas Coleman, 78, of the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine, and Jeffrey Friedman, 56, of Rockefeller University in New York. They are honored for the

discovery of the [hormone leptin](#), which helps regulate appetite and body weight.

In the 1970s, Coleman showed that mice have some sort of appetite-suppressing substance in the blood. Friedman identified the substance in 1994 and named it leptin. People have leptin too, and the research opened new avenues for exploring the biological basis of human [obesity](#), the foundation said.

A Lasker award for special achievement in medical research goes to Dr. David Weatherall, 77, of Oxford University. He is honored for 50 years of "international statesmanship in biomedical science," including his research on an inherited anemia called thalassemia.

The Lasker foundation was established in 1942. Albert Lasker was an advertising executive who died in 1952. His wife Mary was a longtime champion of medical research before her death in 1994.

More information: <http://www.laskerfoundation.org>
Macular degeneration: <http://bit.ly/19gxLL>

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Citation: Prizes honor studies in vision loss, obesity (2010, September 21) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-09-prizes-honor-vision-loss-obesity.html>

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