

Italian Nobel medicine winner Dulbecco dies at 97

February 20 2012, By NICOLE WINFIELD , Associated Press



A 1997 file photo of Italian biologist, physician and geneticist Renato Dulbecco, Nobel Prize laureate in 1975, who has died in La Jolla, Ca., Monday, Feb. 20, 2012. He was 97. Dulbecco's research, carried out between the fifties and the seventies, in the laboratory of the University of Bloomington, Indiana, the prestigious California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena, the Institute of Virology in Glasgow, and finally the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, led to the discovery of the mechanism of action of tumor viruses in animal cells; discovery for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1975. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno, File)

Renato Dulbecco, who shared the 1975 Nobel Prize in medicine for his seminal research on the interaction between tumors and cells, has died in California. He was 97.

Dulbecco, an early proponent of sequencing genomes that led to the Human Genome Project, died in La Jolla, California overnight, Italy's National Research Council - where Dulbecco worked on the genome project in the 1990s - said Monday.

Dulbecco was a founding fellow of the La Jolla-based Salk Institute for Biological Studies, where he was an emeritus president and distinguished professor.

He moved from Italy to California early in his career, working first at Caltech in 1949, then at Salk in 1962, and then onwards to England, where he worked at the Imperial Cancer Research Fund Laboratories in London from 1972-1977.

Dulbecco - who would have been 98 on Wednesday - shared the Nobel prize in medicine in 1975 along with David Baltimore and Howard Martin Temin "for their discoveries concerning the interaction between tumor viruses and the genetic material of the cell" according to the Nobel committee.

His prize-winning research gave the first clue to the genetic nature of cancer, showing how a virus could insert its own genes into the chromosome of the cell it infects and spark cancer's characteristic uncontrolled growth, according to the Salk Institute.

In 1986, Dulbecco wrote a seminal editorial in the journal Science in which he called for sequencing the cellular genome to understand tumor virology and cancer in general - the research that came to be the Human Genome Project.

"He wasn't the only one, but he was one of the few calling for this at a time when people said it was too expensive and useless," said Dr. Paolo Vezzoni, a longtime collaborator at the National Research Council.

Dulbecco's Nobel autobiography says that he worked on the Italian genome project from 1992 until 1997 and achieved some results, but financing dried up and he returned full-time to Salk.

Born in 1914 in Catanzaro, Italy, Dulbecco was twice called up for service during World War II as a medical officer and was injured during a 1942 Russian offensive, according to the autobiography. After recovering and being sent home, he joined the Italian Resistance in a small town in northern Piemonte and worked as a physician to local partisan units.

Dulbecco has said he was strongly influenced by Rita Levi-Montalcini, 102, an Italian scientist and senator-for-life who won the Nobel for medicine in 1986.

He is survived by his second wife, Maureen, and two daughters, Vezzoni said.

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Citation: Italian Nobel medicine winner Dulbecco dies at 97 (2012, February 20) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-nobel-winning-italian-cancer-doctor-dies.html>

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