

Scientists honored for research toward hepatitis C therapies

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Three scientists will share a prestigious medical prize for research that led to major new drugs for treating hepatitis C.

The Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation also announced Tuesday that it was honoring three other scientists for discoveries about how cells handle oxygen, plus another scientist for DNA research and his leadership in science and education.

The Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medicine Research Award went to Ralf Bartenschlager of the University of Heidelberg in Germany, Charles Rice of Rockefeller University in New York, and Michael Sofia of Arbutus Biopharma Corp., which is based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Bartenschlager and Rice made crucial discoveries about the hepatitis C virus, which can cause liver failure and cancer. Their work in the 1990s to mid-2000s allowed scientists to grow and study the virus in a laboratory, a key step toward developing better drugs.

Sofia and collaborators did just that while he was working for a biotech company called Pharmasset, Inc. They came up with a pill sold as Sovaldi that received federal approval in 2013.

Gilead Sciences Inc., which acquired Pharmasset, sells Sovaldi and a second hepatitis C drug, Harvoni, which combines Sovaldi with another medication.

The two drugs were major advances in treating the disease. Aside from their high cure rates, both drugs have gained attention for their steep prices for a course of treatment.

The award for basic medical research is shared by William Kaelin Jr. of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, Peter Ratcliffe of Oxford University and Gregg Semenza of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Their work, which illuminated how cells in people and most animals adapt to changes in the availability of oxygen, may lead to new medicines for such disorders as anemia, heart disease and cancer, the foundation said.

The Lasker award for special achievement went to Bruce Alberts of the University of California, San Francisco. He was honored for discoveries about how cells copy DNA, writing an innovative cell biology textbook that has been translated into 11 languages, leadership in science and dedication to improving education in science and mathematics.

The \$250,000 Lasker prizes will be presented Sept. 23 in New York City.

More information: Lasker Foundation: laskerfoundation.org

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