

Nobel jury caught off guard by death of laureate

3 October 2011, by Pia Ohlin

The Nobel Medicine Prize jury was caught off guard Monday when it honoured a Canadian scientist who unbeknownst to them [died just days before the announcement](#), with prize rules forbidding posthumous awards.

The committee was not aware that Ralph Steinman, who was named the 2011 Medicine Prize laureate together with Bruce Beutler of the United States and Luxembourg-born Frenchman Jules Hoffmann, passed away just days before Monday's announcement, the head of the committee said.

Steinman, 68, died of pancreatic cancer on September 30, according to a statement on Monday issued by Rockefeller University in New York where he worked.

The Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute that awards the prize was meeting late Monday to discuss how to handle the situation.

Annika Pontikis, spokeswoman of the Nobel Foundation, could not confirm to AFP if this was the first time such a situation had arisen, but said it was "very unlikely" it had occurred before.

Earlier, the head of the Nobel Assembly, Goeran Hansson, insisted the committee would stand by its choice.

"We just got the information. What we can do now is only to regret that he could not experience the joy," Hansson told Swedish news agency TT, adding: "We don't name new winners, that was our decision."

"How it will be done in practice to hand out the prize is what we will have to investigate," he said, adding that they were "examining the rules."

The statutes of the Nobel Foundation stipulate since 1974 that the award may not be given

posthumously, but a person may be awarded the honour if he or she dies between the time of the announcement in October and the formal prize ceremony in December.

"Work produced by a person since deceased shall not be considered for an award. If, however, a prizewinner dies before he has received the prize, then the prize may be presented," the rules state.

Only two people have won a Nobel posthumously, before the statutes were changed.

The first was Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish secretary general of the United Nations who died in a plane crash in 1961 and received the Nobel Peace Prize the same year.

And in 1931, the Nobel prize in literature was awarded posthumously to another Swede, Erik Axel Karlfeldt.

Steinman, Beutler and Hoffmann were honoured for their pioneering research on the immune system.

Beutler and Hoffmann shared one half of the 10 million kronor (\$1.48 million, 1.08 million euros) prize, while Steinman was awarded the other half.

The three were lauded for their work on the body's complex defence system in which signalling molecules unleash antibodies and killer cells to respond to invading microbes.

Understanding this throws open the door to new drugs and also tackling immune disorders, such as asthma, rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn's disease, in which the body mysteriously attacks itself.

The prize is to be formally handed over at a gala ceremony in Stockholm on December 10, the anniversary of the death of prize creator Alfred Nobel in 1896.

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