

# Three earn prestigious awards for studies of cancer, DNA damage

8 September 2015, by Malcolm Ritter

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Three researchers won prestigious medical awards Tuesday for a new approach to treating cancer and insights into how creatures deal with DNA damage.

The Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation also honored the medical group Doctors Without Borders for its work on health emergencies, such as Africa's Ebola outbreak.

The Lasker prizes, each of which includes an honorarium of \$250,000, will be presented Sept. 18 in New York City. This is the 70th year for the awards.

The Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award went to James Allison of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. The foundation said he "cracked open a brand-new therapeutic world" by finding a particular way to make a patient's body attack cancer. That approach has greatly prolonged survival for many people with advanced cases of the deadly skin cancer melanoma, the foundation said.

Allison's research focused on a protein on the surface of some disease-fighting cells of the immune system. In mice, he showed that the protein was preventing the immune system from attacking tumors, and that blocking its effect could fight cancers. After studies showed success in human patients, the federal government approved a drug based on the approach in 2011.

The general approach pioneered by Allison is now being tested against many other cancers, the foundation said.

The Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award was shared by Stephen Elledge of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and Evelyn Witkin, a professor emerita at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

They laid the foundation for understanding how humans and other creatures respond to DNA damage from radiation, chemicals or other causes, the foundation said. Witkin started investigating radiation resistance in bacteria in 1944, and Elledge began work on DNA damage in yeast in the 1980s.

The Lasker-Bloomberg Public Service Award was given to Doctors Without Borders "for bold leadership in responding to the recent Ebola outbreak in Africa and for sustained and effective frontline responses to [health emergencies](#)."

The organization provides medical assistance and humanitarian aid in response to war, famine, infectious disease and natural disasters. It was founded in France in 1971 and now consists of 24 national or regional associations.

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:** Lasker Foundation: [laskerfoundation.org](http://laskerfoundation.org)

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