Award for Outstanding Contributions to Cancer Research

Dr Dr Varun Venkataramani and Dr Moritz Mall have been awarded this year's Hella Bühler Prize for their outstanding research on the interaction between nerve and tumor cells and on tumor plasticity. The award granted by Heidelberg University goes to young researchers from the Heidelberg research location who have already drawn attention to themselves through the outstanding scientific quality of their cancer research. Neurologist Venkataramani conducts research in the field of cancer neuroscience on aggressive brain tumors. He leads a junior research group at the Heidelberg University Hospital. Biochemist Mall heads a junior research group at the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) and the Hector Institute for Translational Brain Research; he will be honored for his cell and tumor biology research. The awardees share the prize, which is endowed with 100,000 euros. The award ceremony is taking place on 14 May 2025.

Dr Venkataramani's field of cancer neuroscience focuses on the interactions between the nervous system and cancer. With his team, the neurologist has been instrumental in the groundbreaking discovery of how healthy nerve cells in the brain establish contact with glioblastoma tumor cells, thus promoting the spread of these incurable brain tumors and increasing resistance to therapies. His research aims to find ways to disrupt these intercellular communication pathways and improve chances of recovery. The neurologist earned a doctorate in medicine in 2019 and a doctorate in natural sciences in 2020 at Heidelberg University. As a postdoc, he conducted research at the German Cancer Research Center and Heidelberg University Hospital, and served as a visiting scientist in Boston (USA) and at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg. Since 2022, Dr Venkataramani has led a junior research group at the hospital.

Dr Mall's research focuses on the plasticity of cells, i.e. their ability to deviate from their established identity. Using functional brain or liver cells, he and his team investigate the role of cellular plasticity in tumors. In this context, he discovered what is known as "guardian factors". These repressors permanently suppress undesirable gene programs in tumor cells, preventing healthy cells in the body from becoming drivers of disease. The biochemist conducted his doctoral research at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg and earned his doctorate in 2011 at ETH Zurich. He then worked as a postdoc at Stanford University School of Medicine in the USA. Since 2018, Dr Mall has led the junior research group "Cell Fate Engineering and Disease Modeling" at the Hector Institute for Translational Brain Research, a joint project of the DKFZ and the Central Institute of Mental Health (CIMH) in Mannheim, supported by the Hector Foundation II.

The Vice-Rector for Research and Digitalization at Heidelberg University, Prof. Dr Andreas Dreuw, will open the event to award the Hella Bühler Prize. Dr Ana Banito will then give a retrospective report on her work. She leads a junior research group based at the Hopp Children's Cancer Center Heidelberg (KiTZ) and the German Cancer Research Center and was awarded the Hella Bühler Prize in 2024. The formal address honoring this year's awardees will be delivered by Prof. Dr Frank Winkler, Managing Senior Physician at the Department of Neurology of Heidelberg University Hospital and head of the Experimental Neurooncology Research Group, which is part of the Clinical Cooperation Unit Neurooncology at the DKFZ. Dr Venkataramani and Dr Mall will then give short presentations to share insights into their research.

The research prize donated by the Heidelberg dentist Dr Hella Bühler (1910 to 2002) goes to early-career researchers at Heidelberg University or to young researchers involved in scientific collaboration with Ruperto Carola. The award aims to support the prize winners at an early stage in their careers in continuing and deepening their already outstanding achievements in the field of cancer research. Granted by the university, it is one of the most valuable awards in the field of cancer research in Germany.

Press release

13-May-2025
Source: Heidelberg University

Further information

- Heidelberg University