

DKFZ Innovation Award and DKFZ Patient Expert Award Presented

The Friends of the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) support the DKFZ and aim to help strengthen its position in the international arena. With the DKFZ Innovation Award, presented at this year's annual reception, the association honors Helmut Salih, a researcher whose innovative work bridges the gap between immunological research and patient care. The DKFZ Patient Expert Award was also presented; this year's recipient is Stephanie Houwaart for her long-standing commitment as a member of the DKFZ/DKTK Cancer Research Patient Advisory Board.

This year, the jury awarded the DKFZ Innovation Award to Helmut Salih. The physician and immunologist is head of the Clinical Cooperation Unit for Translational Immunology at the DKTK* and a professor of translational immunology at the University of Tübingen. He is receiving the award for his outstanding contributions to the development of new cancer immunotherapies. His goal is to activate the body's own immune system so that it specifically recognizes and destroys tumor cells—and to translate promising research findings into patient care as quickly as possible.

His work focuses on novel bispecific antibodies. These protein structures bind simultaneously to tumor cells and T cells—the most important players in the immune system—thereby triggering a highly precise immune response against cancer. Salih's research group has developed several of these therapeutic agents and has already advanced them to clinical trials—including for acute myeloid leukemia, prostate cancer, and other solid tumors. In addition, Salih is developing new antibody formats that not only guide T cells to the tumor but also provide them with an additional activation signal. This is intended to make the immune response both stronger and more targeted.

Salih is being honored not only for individual drug developments but also for his consistent translational approach: he bridges the gap between basic research, drug development, and clinical application. He has guided numerous innovative immunotherapies from the laboratory stage through to clinical trials, thereby demonstrating that academic institutions, too, can successfully develop new cancer therapies.

Patents and collaborations with industry partners ensure that these innovations benefit patients as quickly as possible. Two spin-off companies that Salih has launched also support this translational process. One of these companies, TWYCE GmbH, received 45 million euros in funding from the "Bundesagentur für Sprunginnovation" (Sprin-D).

Shalini Saxena, Administrative Director (interim) of the DKFZ, said at the award ceremony: "Helmut Salih combines science and entrepreneurial spirit: With scientific foresight and entrepreneurial courage, he develops innovative immunotherapies through to clinical trials and creates the conditions necessary for them to reach market maturity.

Also at the DKFZ annual reception, the DKFZ Patient Expert Award was presented for the third time. This award is intended to honor patient representatives who have made outstanding contributions to cancer research in Germany.

The prize, worth 5,000 euros, was awarded to Stephanie Houwaart of the DKFZ/DKTK Cancer Research Patient Advisory Board for her long-standing, multifaceted, and pioneering commitment.

"In this role, Stephanie Houwaart brings the perspective of those affected into research strategies and translational oncology projects and plays a key role in raising the profile of patient involvement and embedding it structurally," emphasized Michael Baumann, Chairman of the DKFZ Executive Board, at the award ceremony.

In addition, as an advisor on health research and policy at the BRCA-Netzwerk e.V., Stephanie Houwaart has for years been shaping the strategic integration of patients into research projects and health policy processes. She has also been active, among other roles, as a coordinator for patient interests at German Cancer Aid. Her areas of focus include participatory health and cancer research, genomic medicine, survivorship, quality of life, and organizational health literacy.

* The German Consortium for Translational Cancer Research (DKTK) is one of the eight German Centers for Health Research and connects the DKFZ with partner university sites throughout Germany.

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Further information

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