Harald zur Hausen wins Nobel Prize in Medicine

Harald zur Hausen, the long-time chairman and scientific director of the German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ), a member of the Helmholtz Society, discovered that human papillomaviruses (HPV) lead to cervical cancer. His discovery led to the development of a vaccine for cervical cancer, which is the third most frequent type of cancer in women. Zur Hausen shares the Nobel Prize with two French researchers of the Institut Pasteur. Françoise Barré-Sinoussi and Luc Montagnier won half the prize for their discovery of the HI virus that causes AIDS.

More than thirty years ago, zur Hausen already suspected that there was a link between human papillomavirus infections and cervical cancer. In the early 1980s, the German scientist and his team succeeded in isolating the virus types HPV 16 and HPV 18 from cervical cancer biopsies.

"We are very proud of Harald zur Hausen and his outstanding scientific achievements. We are very proud that the fruits of his labours have made a considerable contribution to cancer prevention. Harald zur Hausen came up with a completely new hypothesis, which he thoroughly tested thus achieving a major breakthrough and huge progress in the field of women's health," said Prof. Dr. Otmar D. Wiestler, scientific director of the German Cancer Research Centre. Wiestler’s colleague and administrative-commercial director of the DKFZ, Josef Puchta, added: "This prize is awarded for a lifetime’s outstanding scientific work. We are very happy to witness how a scientific idea has made its way to medical application within this researcher’s life." The vaccine, which was developed on the basis of the fundamental research carried out in zur Hausen’s laboratory, has recently been approved for application in Germany and is an excellent example of the successful transfer of a technology from basic research.

Prof. Harald zur Hausen (Photo: DKFZ)

Harald zur Hausen was born in 1936 and studied medicine at university. He received a Doctor of Medicine degree in 1960 from the University of Düsseldorf, and then went on to work at the Institute of Medical Microbiology at the University of Düsseldorf. He moved to the Virus Laboratories at the Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia and qualified as professor at the University of Würzburg in 1969. In 1972, he accepted the chair of Clinical Virology at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. In 1977, he moved on to the University of Freiburg where he became the chair of the Department of Virology and Hygiene. From 1983 until 2003, zur Hausen served as chairman and scientific member of the management board of the German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ) in Heidelberg. Under his leadership, the DKFZ expanded its collaboration with university hospitals. Clinical cooperation units now ensure close contact between basic research and clinical medicine so as to ensure the swift transfer of research results into practical applications.

Harald zur Hausen has received numerous awards, including the Prince Mahidol Award 2006 and the German Cancer Aid Prize 2007. He was also awarded the Great Cross of Merit in 2004.
Schavan: "Excellent distinction of German cancer research"

Federal Research Minister Annette Schavan congratulated Harald zur Hausen on the receipt of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. "I am delighted for him and am very pleased that he has received the highest distinction in science," said Schavan. "The Prize goes to an outstanding scientist and at the same time it is an excellent distinction for German research. It confirms the pioneering role of Germany, and in particular of the German Cancer Research Centre in Heidelberg, on an international level," said the Minister.