

Thursday 30 June 2016

Founding father of cancer immunology research honoured at summer graduation

The scientist who pioneered the field of cancer immunology is to be given an honorary degree by the University of Southampton.

Professor George Stevenson can be described as one of the founding fathers of cancer immunotherapy research, after being one of the first scientists to publish a paper describing the concept that the immune system could be steered towards fighting cancer.

Professor Stevenson will receive his honorary degree alongside nearly 500 students who will attend Graduation ceremonies today (Friday 15 July 2016). Five other guests will also receive honorary degrees in the fields of science and letters throughout the University's summer graduation programme.

Professor Stevenson said: "I am delighted to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Southampton. A second major source of satisfaction is that the subject of cancer immunology, started at the University on a modest scale in 1970, has blossomed to the extent of having splendid teams of medical scientists working alongside clinicians who all work to demanding standards in providing both established and innovative methods of treatment for patients."

In the 1970s, when technology was very primitive compared with now, Professor Stevenson and his team at the University of Southampton discovered that in each individual patient, all malignant B-cells (cancer cells) display a unique "marker" protein called an idiotype. Because this marker was only present on cancer cells and not normal body cells it offered a precise location to be targeted by antibodies produced by the body's natural immune system. It was this discovery which was key to opening up the field of cancer immunotherapy.

Since this early finding, the University of Southampton's cancer immunology research has rapidly grown and is now using the immune system to fight aggressive forms of cancer including skin, head and neck, lung and childhood neuroblastoma.

The University is currently building the UK's first dedicated centre to cancer immunology research. The Centre for Cancer Immunology, which will open in 2017, will bring world-leading cancer scientists under one roof and enable interdisciplinary teams to expand clinical trials and develop lifesaving drugs.

The University launched a campaign to raise £25 million to fund the new building. The campaign has received huge support, with the University having raised 75 per cent of the target and now looking for additional supporters to raise the remaining £6.3m.

Professor Stevenson added: "Cancer Immunology at Southampton will be markedly enhanced by the laboratory facilities made available upon completion of the Centre. I

look forward to being able to visit the new centre to view the exciting work our scientists are doing to ensure more people are able to live cancer free.” Professor Martin Glennie, who worked with Professor Stevenson as a PhD student in the late 70s, commented: “I am very proud to have worked with George Stevenson and his team in the late 70s. It was his insight into the structure of cancer targets and how antibody drugs could be engineered to attack these targets which is now helping us win the fight against cancer.”

In 1982 Professor Stevenson was the first person outside the USA to receive the Armand Hammer Prize, for his pioneering work with antibody drugs. This prestigious award was shared with Ron Levy from Stanford.

Since then Professor Stevenson’s work has been cited thousands of times by researchers around the world. He is one of the field’s most highly respected academics with a body of work spanning 40 years.

The Graduation ceremonies will take place in Turner Sims and the Nuffield Theatre from up until Thursday 21 July 2016.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. Photo attached of Professor George Stevenson. Members of the media are invited to attend photo calls for the honorary graduands, please contact Media Relations to confirm timings and location.
2. Through world-leading research and enterprise activities, the University of Southampton connects with businesses to create real-world solutions to global issues. Through its educational offering, it works with partners around the world to offer relevant, flexible education, which trains students for jobs not even thought of. This connectivity is what sets Southampton apart from the rest; we make connections and change the world.
<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/>
<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/weareconnected> #weareconnected
3. Building on its cancer immunology research expertise and recent successes in immunotherapy trials, the University of Southampton has launched a major fundraising campaign to raise £25m to open the UK’s first dedicated Centre for Cancer Immunology at Southampton General Hospital in 2017. The Centre will be the first of its kind in the UK and will bring together world-leading specialists in a unique state-of-the art centre. The aim of the new Centre is to accelerate research progress, conduct more clinical trials and save more lives from cancer. Find out more about it at
www.southampton.ac.uk/youreit

For more information:

Becky Attwood, Media Relations, University of Southampton, Tel 023 8059 3212,
email r.attwood@southampton.ac.uk twitter beckyattwood07