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Lautenschläger Research Prize Awarded to Prof. Kramer

Federal research minister Bulmahn presented the Lautenschläger Research Prize 2003 to cancer research scientist Prof. Peter Kramer—Frau Bulmahn emphasised that the recipient's work in the field of controlled cell death opens up entirely new perspectives for cancer therapy

At a presentation ceremony on 10 October, Prof. Dr. Peter Kramer from the German Cancer Research Centre was awarded the Lautenschläger Research Prize of the University of Heidelberg 2003. Prof. Kramer was selected by the awarding committee from an extensive list of outstanding nominees from Germany and abroad (including America and Australia).

The Research Prize is endowed with EUR 250,000. Its aim is to encourage the University of Heidelberg's activities in the field of international scientific and scholarly cooperation. As such, the Lautenschläger Research Prize comes out clearly in support of the two major strategic principles of the University: interdisciplinarity and internationalism.

Exemplary private commitment

The Lautenschläger Research Prize is donated by Manfred Lautenschläger, the founder of the financial services company MLP AG. Before more than 450 invited guests, Federal minister Edelgard Bulmahn said: "Effective and efficient research is the elixir of our society, it guarantees prosperity and progress. I have not the slightest doubt that, thanks to its interesting profile and the selection of such outstanding recipients, this relatively new prize will soon be firmly established in the academic community."

She went on to say that Professor Kramer's distinction with the Prize was the successful result of mutually beneficial cooperation between basic research at the German Cancer Research Centre and clinical research at the University of Heidelberg. For Germany as a whole, this cooperation was an example to be emulated.

The minister also emphasised the importance of private commitment for the research world. The recipient of the Prize in 2001, Professor Johanna Stachel, expressly underlined this point in her speech, adding that the freedom accorded to her in the use of the prize monies had helped her encourage upcoming young scientists without having to engage in time-consuming application procedures.

Humanities equally eligible

The ceremonial address was delivered by one of Europe's most prominent intellectuals, the Spanish writer Jorge Semprún. Rector

Hommelhoff underlined the symbolism of this choice. It was a token, he said, of the necessity for the humanities to "determinedly pit themselves against the sometimes overwhelming supremacy of the life sciences and the natural sciences in Heidelberg."

Reaching for the stars

In his speech of thanks, Professor Krammer exhorted his younger colleagues to bear one thing in mind: "All I can say, again and again, is, 'Reach for the stars!'. We need an elite in Germany, and we should say so unequivocally!"

Prof. Krammer's pioneering research on controlled cell death

Professor Dr. Peter Krammer, director of the department of immune genetics at the German Cancer Research Centre, was awarded the Lautenschläger Research Prize for his pioneering research on apoptosis or controlled cell death. The crucial significance of his work for medical research was underlined in the laudatio by Prof. Kleihues, who also expressed his confidence that further major progress could be expected from Professor Krammer and his research group in future.

Apoptosis is the most frequent form of natural cell death in the organism. It serves to rid the organism of cells that have either done the work allotted to them, become superfluous in the course of embryo development or display defects in their hereditary substance.

At the embryonic stage, a hand will only developed if the finger buds are fully developed and at the same time cells in the interstices between the fingers die off as a result of apoptosis. Controlled cell death also plays a major role in the adult organism, for example in the immune system, in the thyroid gland, in the maintenance of self-tolerance, the destruction of auto-reactive cells and the deactivation of immune response. The conclusion from this was spelled out by Prof. Krammer in his speech of thanks: "Without a systematic death programme, without death, without apoptosis, no well-regulated life is possible."

Apoptosis is important for clinical research. Many illnesses can be described not least in terms of "too much" or "too little" apoptosis in the cells of the organs affected. Controlled cell death is designed as a protective mechanism and if it gets out of hand it can cause a wide range of illnesses. This can happen in one of two ways. Too much cell death activity leads to uncontrolled tissue degeneration and can be observed in patients with heart attacks, strokes, lesions of the spinal cord, AIDS, Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's disease. By contrast, too little apoptosis is a central problem in cancer and auto-immune diseases. Prof. Krammer's research aims at counteracting these processes and thus making the diseases involved easier to deal with.

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