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AN OLD VIKING REWARDS EXCELLENT SCIENCE

A conversation with **OLE PETTER OTTERSEN**, professor of medicine at the University of Oslo, and Liselotte Hoejgaard, professor of medicine and technology at the University of Copenhagen, chair and member of the Olav Thon Foundation's science advisory board



The Olav Thon Foundation awarded its first international research prize in 2015. The five million Norwegian kroner (about \$600,000) is a gift from the fortune of 94-year-old property developer and hotelier, Olav Thon. To be considered for the prize, high-flying medical researchers, natural scientists or mathematicians must be nominated by international peers. Those working in medicine should contribute to the understanding of the brain and brain ageing. Here, two researchers involved in the evaluation process outline the award's aims.

The Olav Thon foundation is one of just a handful of foundations that offer philanthropic support for research in Norway. Other nearby countries have a long tradition of philanthropic support for research. Why is that?

OPO: That comes down to two issues. Norway hasn't really had a knowledge-based industry to the same extent as our neighbors, because we have been fortunate to live off natural resources, like our forests, fisheries, and oil. We haven't developed a pharmaceutical industry, for example, as Sweden and Denmark have. Also, there hasn't been a culture of establishing private foundations in support of science in Norway.

LH: Denmark is actually the country with the world's highest percentage of research funding coming from private charities and foundations. The tradition started in 1876 when J.C. Jacobsen, who had the Carlsberg Brewery, donated his entire fortune to the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. We still own it. There are five professors from the Royal Academy who sit on the brewery board, and even the chairman is a professor. It's nice that scientists can do good business — and now we

have the fifth biggest brewery in the world.

It's nice to spread these stories to other countries and say, "Are you a rich person? If you have some money, please give it to science because we need it." Olav Thon is a wonderful story. This old gentleman, even if he's wearing a tuxedo, he'll still have his red cap on. He's very charming and extremely sharp and has always been interested in science.

Who has won the International Research Prize so far?

OPO: The last winner, Jan Hoeijmakers, from Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam, identified a new system of DNA repair. He has paved the way for a lot of research in many different fields of medicine, including understanding mechanisms behind ageing and cancer. The previous winner was Jean-Pierre Changeux, of the Pasteur Institute in Paris, who has connected a deep understanding of receptor molecules and their regulation to new insights into the functions and diseases of the brain. The winners in 2015 were Judith Campisi from the Buck Institute of California and Josef Shiloh from the University of Tel Aviv. Campisi

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researches age-related diseases and Shiloh studies substances that damage our genetic material. The prizes are not for lifetime achievement. They are for excellence.

Do researchers working in non-medical fields have a chance of winning?

LH: Absolutely. We receive nominations from academies all over the world — including the Chinese Academy of Science. But we do want more nominations. People know about the Nobel Prize, the Brain Prize, the Kavli Prize, but fewer know about the Olav Thon Prize. The Olav Thon Prize honours individual scientists for their excellent contributions to science.

What are the assessment process and the ceremony like?

OPO: The nominations are evaluated by external experts. Based on these evaluations, the academic committee proposes a winner for final decision by the board of the foundation.

The ceremony takes place in the University aula Oslo where the Nobel Peace Prize

was handed out between 1947 and 1989. The winners are invited to a seminar on the same day where they have the opportunity to talk about their research and engage in discussions with other scientists.

Increasingly important discoveries in science and medicine are the work of big teams, yet most research prizes still reward individuals. So you see that as a problem?

LH: We see that the winners are well aware of this, and always emphasize that the honor is not bestowed on one person but on the entire group that they represent. However, I believe that science is really about people, and it's still individuals who really drive projects forward.

I've had the privilege of attending the Lindau meetings and the scientists there have a common thing, a generosity in sharing their ideas and beliefs, a really nice way of being leaders. We should celebrate this.



The Olav Thon Foundation's International Research Award for Mathematics/Natural Sciences and Medicine

We look forward to awarding 5,000,000 Norwegian Kroner (~ £450,000) to one outstanding researcher working in the field of mathematics or natural sciences or medicine. We invite serving professors of those disciplines to nominate candidates -- from anywhere in the world -- for the 2018 award.

In the field of medicine, special attention will be given to gerontology, as well as studies of brain function and ageing. There are no special instructions for mathematics and the natural sciences.

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