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JMNMF Announces 40% Increase in Melanoma Research Scholarships

The Joanna M. Nicolay Melanoma Foundation (JMNMF) increased 2011 funding by 40% in announcing seven nationally competitive “Research Scholar Awards” (RSA), presented to exceptional graduate student researchers, at leading cancer centers across the U.S. The JMNMF annual $10,000 scholarships, significantly enhance the potential for advancements in the melanoma cancer field, and encourage a larger number of students to choose melanoma research as their professional career path.

The 2011 RSA ceremony at the University of Virginia Cancer Center included (left to right) Kevin Janes, Ph.D. and Ass’t. Professor of the Dept. of Biomedical Engineering (BME); Esther Hoffberg, JMNMF Board & RSA Committee member; Karin Holmberg, RSA recipient and BME graduate student; Greg Safko, JMNMF President; and, Kathryn Thornton, Professor of Engineering and Applied Science and Associate Dean for Graduate Programs.

The 2011 RSA applicant pool, and cancer research centers represented, grew to include 26 of the country’s most promising young melanoma researchers and 16 prominent National Cancer Institute (NCI)-Designated Cancer Centers or members of the Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI). Now celebrating the program’s fifth anniversary, the Foundation’s awards were initially piloted with the Johns Hopkins Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center in 2006, and expanded nationally to benefit the broader academic, scientific, clinical and patient communities.
According to Robert E. Nicolay, JMNMF Chairman, “Our Foundation’s ‘Research Scholar Awards’ are invaluable at the grassroots level, to specifically grow interest in melanoma research, at qualified cancer centers across the country. If we can attract the brightest minds that are considering, or already within, the nation’s cancer research pipelines, to pursue a career in melanoma research – we’re that much closer to better understanding the disease, identifying the means for effective treatments and, most importantly, finding a cure for this deadly and very prevalent disease.”

In the Janes lab, Karin Holmberg’s (c) RSA research project “Identifying Network Mechanisms of Targeted Drug Synergy in Melanoma,” is projected to provide a platform for interrogating molecular states broadly and combinatorially to design more effective melanoma therapies in the future and also contribute to identify and understand drug pairings that may one day be used to treat metastatic melanoma without acquired resistance. Greg Safko, JMNMF President, and Esther Hoffberg, JMNMF Board and RSA committee member, tour the lab and learn more of the multi-disciplinary initiative and research assets in melanoma research at the UVA Cancer Center.
In 2011, the JMNMF is very pleased to award the following students and their institutions:

- Katelyn Byrne – Dartmouth College, Norris Cotton Cancer Center
- Karin Holmberg – University of Virginia Cancer Center
- John Kwon – University of Texas, MD Anderson Cancer Center
- Katie Matatall – Washington Univ. in St. Louis, School of Medicine, Siteman Cancer Center
- Amanda McIntyre – University of Washington, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
- Yvonne Gruber Mica – Gerstner Sloan-Kettering Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences
- Eric Van Otterloo – Univ. of Iowa, Carver College of Medicine, Holden Comprehensive Cancer Ctr.

The Foundation continues to experience tremendous growth in this valuable student research program in both depth and breadth of funding, and in the diversity of candidates and institutions participating.

The following academic/cancer research centers were represented by 2011 RSA applications:

- Boston University School of Medicine - Boston Medical Center
- Dartmouth College - Norris Cotton Cancer Center
- Penn State University - Hershey Cancer Institute
- Gerstner Sloan-Kettering Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences
- University of Florida - H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center
- University of Iowa – Holden Comprehensive Cancer Center
- University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine – Abramson Cancer Center
- University of Rochester Sch. of Med. – University of Rochester Medical Center
- University of Texas - MD Anderson Cancer Center
- University of Utah - Huntsman Cancer Institute
- University of Virginia Cancer Center
- University of Washington - Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
- Vanderbilt University Medical Center – Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center
- Washington University in St. Louis – Siteman Cancer Center
- Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences – Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
- Yale University School of Medicine – Yale Comprehensive Cancer Center

Outstanding recognition is deserved by each of these institutions for encouragement of their participating RSA graduate candidates and, funding aside, nothing more greatly impacts the research communities’ collective efforts, than the existence of a broad national base of independent and collaborative melanoma research programs. The JMNMF applauds all, and strongly encourages continued academic/cancer center participation in the JMNMF “Research Scholar Award” program in 2012 and beyond.

The JMNMF also proudly recognizes the RSA Professional Advisory Panel that unselfishly reviews each student researcher application thoroughly, and provides extensive expertise and professionalism in objectively evaluating candidate applications. 2011 Panel members are, as follows:

Rhoda M. Alani, M.D.
Herbert Mescon Professor and Chair
Dermatologist-in-Chief, Department of Dermatology, Boston University School of Medicine
Boston Medical Center
Boston, MA
Meenhard Herlyn, D.V.M., D.Sc.
Professor and Program Leader, Molecular and Cellular Oncogenesis Program
Deputy Director for Translational Research, The Wistar Institute Cancer Center
Director, The Wistar Institute Melanoma Research Center
Philadelphia, PA

John M. Kirkwood, M.D.
Usher Professor of Medicine and Dermatology
Director, Melanoma and Skin Cancer Program, University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute
Vice Chairman for Clinical Research, Department of Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
Pittsburgh, PA

All 26 RSA candidates were objectively evaluated in two stages utilizing a quantifiable rating spreadsheet tool: First, independently by the RSA Professional Advisory Panel members; and, secondly, on an independent basis by the Foundation’s RSA Committee comprised of Board of Director members. Independent results for both groups were then separately compiled and utilized by the RSA Committee for final awards discussion and selection. Five broad candidate evaluation categories included: Scope & Innovation; Feasibility; Organization; Future Collaboration & Application; and, Overall panel/committee recommendations of individual applicants that also ruled out any applicant/evaluator bias/conflicts. Each category for all applicants was scored within a range of metrics to reach a summary score. Though difficult, the final evaluations and awards are the result of a broad collective analysis. The Foundation continues to refine and improve the process in each successive award year. All RSA recipients, and the entire pool of applicants, represent the fore-front of compelling research to further the understanding of melanoma biology, develop effective treatments and, to definitively find a cure.

JOANNA M. NICOLAY MELANOMA FOUNDATION
The Joanna M. Nicolay Melanoma Foundation is a non-profit public charity founded in January, 2004 to foster melanoma education, advocacy and research. In just over seven years, the Foundation has grown dramatically to become an influential voice in the melanoma community and is now established as a national, and international, “voice for melanoma prevention, detection, care and cure.”

The Joanna M. Nicolay Melanoma Foundation is proud of numerous achievements to date that include:

• Underwriting melanoma research at numerous prestigious university-affiliated cancer centers across the U.S., specifically through research scholarships to the best and brightest young graduate student scientists to further understand melanoma biology, advance discovery of effective treatments and, ultimately, find a cure;
• Successfully launching and expanding a comprehensive high school health curriculum for the key demographic of students (and their families), to learn the deadly risks of melanoma skin cancer and “UV-radiation safe” preventative practices;
• Targeted initiatives, and multi-channel outreach, to ensure broader national awareness of melanoma prevention and detection by the general public; and,
• Providing essential advocacy and care resources for patients and the entire melanoma community.

Further details are available by contacting the Foundation, contact@melanomaresource.org or (410) 857-4890.