

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center



ENDOWMENT PROFILE

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Heath Memorial Award Recognizes Texas-sized Vision



Doctor James P. Allison

THE 2012 HEATH MEMORIAL AWARD honors a native son of international fame who's returning to his Texas roots.

James P. Allison, Ph.D., originally from Alice, received the prestigious award in June at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center's Symposium for Cancer Research. Allison delivered the keynote lecture on cancer immunotherapy, his focus for the past decade.

The late William W. Heath, a former chairman of The University of Texas System Board of Regents, established the endowed Heath Memorial Award in 1965 with his wife, Mavis. The award, which includes a \$5,000 cash prize, is a memorial to Heath's three brothers and honors "outstanding contributions to cancer patient care through the clinical application of basic science." Thanks to the Heaths' vision and the endowment they established nearly 50 years ago, the award has recognized the work of 43 preeminent oncologists and helped advance MD Anderson's mission to eradicate cancer.

Its most recent recipient recalls arriving in 1977 at MD Anderson's Virginia Harris Cockrell Cancer Research Center, Science Park, in Smithville, as an assistant biochemist and assistant professor — his first position after postdoctoral training.

"It was a great time," recalls Allison. "There was a wonderful esprit de corps and sense of collaboration."

From there the budding scientist spent 20 years at the University of California, Berkeley. He recently was recruited from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center back to MD Anderson, this time based in Houston as chair of the Department of Immunology.

In 1995, Allison and team discovered a signaling pathway in the molecule CTLA-4 that shows promise in treating many cancers. A recent trial of a CTLA-4 blockade as second-line therapy in metastatic melanoma showed a mean increase in survival of about five months.

"The drug, Ipilimumab, was the first to achieve this in a randomized phase III trial," says Allison. "Last year the FDA approved Ipilimumab for late-stage melanoma, and it's now considered standard treatment."

By enabling MD Anderson to attract world-class researchers such as Allison to the symposium, says Oliver Bogler, Ph.D., senior vice president for academic affairs and vice president for global academic programs, the Heath Memorial Award helps the institution promote excellence on multiple levels. It recognizes cutting-edge work, adds visibility to the symposium and provides inspiration for attendees eager to grow in their specialties. What's more, the endowment has generated additional funds to support a publication competition among post-doctoral fellows.

"It's a creative use of funds that supports the donors' intent to recognize academic excellence, in not only a person with advanced achievements but also one who's up and coming," says Bogler.

Allison, a prostate cancer survivor who at age 10 lost his mother to lymphoma, says it was gratifying to be recognized by peers, "particularly at such a renowned cancer center as MD Anderson."

This year, the Heath Memorial Award enables MD Anderson to celebrate an accomplished Texan whose work is making a difference in the lives of cancer patients and their families across the globe — and at the same time welcome him home.

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