Two Scientists Honored with MetLife Foundation Awards for Medical Research in Alzheimer's Disease

Dr. Michael S. Wolfe of Harvard Medical School is being honored today with the MetLife Foundation Awards for Medical Research in Alzheimer's Disease. (PRNewsFoto/MetLife Foundation)

WASHINGTON, DC UNITED STATES

Dr. Takeshi Iwatsubo of the University of Tokyo is being honored today with the MetLife Foundation Awards for Medical Research in Alzheimer's Disease. (PRNewsFoto/MetLife Foundation)

WASHINGTON, DC UNITED STATES

WASHINGTON, Feb. 18 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The winners of the MetLife Foundation Awards for Medical Research in Alzheimer's Disease will be announced in Washington, D.C. today, at a scientific briefing and luncheon that honors two scientists whose groundbreaking research has led to significant understanding of Alzheimer's and the substances in the brain that play an important role in the disease. The awardees are Michael S. Wolfe, Ph.D., professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital and Takeshi Iwatsubo, M.D., professor in the Department of Neuropathology in the Graduate School of Medicine at the University of Tokyo.

(Photo: http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20090218/NE71682-a)

(Photo: http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20090218/NE71682-b)

Dr. Wolfe is being honored for his research on the production of amyloid-beta, a small protein found in the Alzheimer's brain now believed to be the fundamental toxic entity initiating the disease, which has led to the development of new therapies for Alzheimer's. Dr. Iwatsubo is being honored for his work on the histopathology and protein biochemistry of postmortem human brains with Alzheimer's, which has led to the establishment of cellular and genetic models that help explain the key steps in the pathological cascade of neurodegeneration.

Since 1986, MetLife Foundation has granted major awards to scientists who have demonstrated significant contributions to the understanding of Alzheimer's disease. The heart of the program is a recognition of the importance of basic research and an emphasis on providing scientists the opportunity to pursue ideas. Each winner receives a $200,000 research grant and personal prize of $50,000 to further their work.

According to recent estimates, more than 26 million people worldwide are believed to be living with Alzheimer's disease. In the United States, as many as 5.2 million Americans have Alzheimer's, making it the sixth leading cause of death. If current population trends continue, the number will increase significantly, unless the disease can be effectively treated, delayed, or prevented. The direct and indirect costs of Alzheimer's and other dementias to Medicare, Medicaid, and businesses amount to more than $148 billion each year, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

"In recognizing the important work of Drs. Wolfe and Iwatsubo, we hope to spur future developments that will help combat Alzheimer's," said C. Robert Henrikson, Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer of MetLife, Inc. "The impact of this disease on families, society, and the economy is why MetLife Foundation continues its commitment to research and the search for a cure."

"Scientists represent our best hope for one day finding the causes and treatments for Alzheimer's," said Sibyl Jacobson of MetLife Foundation. "These awards are an investment in the future, and we thank our awardees for their important contributions to the understanding of Alzheimer's and commend their continued dedication to research."

The event's keynote speech will be delivered by noted writer Mary Ellen Geist, author of Measure of the Heart, which chronicles her life alongside that of her father, Woody Geist, who has Alzheimer's. Ms. Geist left a successful career as an award-winning radio journalist in New York, where she worked for WCBS radio, to return home to Michigan to help care for her father.

The awards program will begin with a research briefing, where the award recipients will discuss their work. The briefing will be moderated by HYPERLINK "http://www.ilcusa.org/pages/about-us/president-ceo/robert-n-butler-md.php" to http://www.ilcusa.org/who/about.html Robert N. Butler, M.D., president and chief executive officer of the International Longevity Center -- USA, and Professor of Geriatrics, Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. Dr. Butler is the chair of the MetLife Foundation's Research Committee and also the founding director of the National Institute on Aging of the National Institutes of Health.

"As the population ages, research on Alzheimer's disease has never been more important," said Dr. Butler. "If unchecked, the medical and caregiving costs could very well make Alzheimer's the most significant disease of this century. However, it's the personal costs that are truly staggering, because Alzheimer's gradually robs individuals of the person they once were. Through this award, MetLife Foundation demonstrates sustained support for scientists working to unravel the mystery of Alzheimer's, by providing leading scientists with the funds to freely pursue their ideas through research."

About the Award for Medical Research Winners

Dr. Wolfe is professor of Neurology at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital. The Wolfe research laboratory strives to understand the basic biochemistry underlying Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative diseases. The major focus is on the production of amyloid-beta, a small protein that deposits in the Alzheimer brain which many believe to be the fundamental toxic entity initiating the disease

In 1998, Dr. Wolfe's laboratory published the first designed inhibitor of gamma-secretase, a protease that is considered an important target for developing new therapies for Alzheimer's disease. The gamma-secretase inhibitors developed in the Wolfe lab have served as chemical probes, providing critical information on the mechanism, identity and biological role of this key protease. In recent years, the Wolfe lab has expanded into the investigation of how changes in RNA can cause Alzheimer's and related dementias, and how certain RNAs can be targeted for therapeutic purposes.

Dr. Wolfe received his B.S. in chemistry from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, his Ph.D. in medicinal chemistry from the University of Kansas, and postdoctoral training in cell biology at the National Institutes of Health. After five years at the University of Tennessee, he joined the Harvard faculty in 1999. Dr. Wolfe was recognized in 2003 with the Sato Memorial International Award from the Pharmaceutical Society of Japan. In 2006, he founded the Laboratory for Experimental Alzheimer Drugs at Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Iwatsubo is professor in the Department of Neuropathology in the Graduate School of Medicine at the University of Tokyo. Dr. Iwatsubo has pursued the pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease (AD) and related neurodegenerative conditions through multidisciplinary approaches, based on histopathology and protein biochemistry of postmortem human brains. He has extended the knowledge derived from the human studies by establishing cellular and genetic models and elucidating the key steps in the pathological cascade of neurodegeneration.

Dr. Iwatsubo's findings have provided a firm basis for the currently prevailing b-amyloid hypothesis. The Iwatsubo group has focused on the mechanisms of y-secretase complex that cleaves the C terminus of Ab, and demonstrated that PS, APH-1, nicastrin and PEN-2 are the essential set of proteins that comprise the y-secretase complex. Recently, his group pioneered the contemporary molecular/cellular biology of PS, which is believed to play a key role in the biological reaction known as "intramembrane proteolysis." His group has also identified several key protein components deposited in the brains of patients with neurodegenerative diseases.

Dr. Iwatsubo received his M.D. (1984) from the University of Tokyo, where he also had a medical internship followed by neurology residency (1984-1989). After postdoctoral research training at Yasuo Ihara lab (1990-1992), he became an associate professor at the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Tokyo in 1992, and Professor in 1998. In 2007, he became the Chairman of the Department of Neuropathology, School of Medicine, University of Tokyo. Dr. Iwatsubo is the recipient of the Japanese Neurological Society Award (2004).

About MetLife Foundation

MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife to carry on its long tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. For more than 20 years, MetLife and MetLife Foundation have invested more than $17 million for Alzheimer's research and public information programs, including over $11.5 million through the Awards for Medical Research in Alzheimer's Disease program. The Foundation has also supported a number of major initiatives, including the PBS documentary The Forgetting: A Portrait of Alzheimer's; short pocket films on Alzheimer's narrated by David Hyde-Pierce; an educational initiative with the National Institute on Aging's Alzheimer's Disease Centers; the film Alzheimer's Disease: Facing the Facts; and initiatives that include caregiving videos, Alzheimer's toolkits, and resources for the Hispanic community. For more information, visit www.metlife.org.

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