



Media Release

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Malaria researcher wins Howard Taylor Ricketts award

Malaria researcher Professor Alan Cowman from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, Australia, has been awarded the 2010 Howard Taylor Ricketts Award by the University of Chicago.

The annual award recognises outstanding accomplishment in the field of medical sciences. It was established in 1913 in memory of Howard Taylor Ricketts, the University of Chicago scientist who demonstrated that Rocky Mountain spotted fever is transferred to man by ticks.

Professor Cowman joins an illustrious list of recipients of the Howard Taylor Ricketts award. Previous recipients include 1993 Nobel Prize winner Phillip Sharp, who co-discovered split genes; Bert Vogelstein; for his work on the tumour suppressors that protect cells from cancerous growth; and Stanley Falkow, who discovered the molecular nature of antibiotic resistance.

Professor Cowman was selected to receive the Howard Taylor Ricketts award by an interdisciplinary faculty committee of the University of Chicago. He learnt of his selection when he unexpectedly received an email from the committee's chair, Professor Bernard Roizman. "It was a very nice surprise and a great honour to join a list that includes such stellar scientists," Professor Cowman said.

For the past 30 years Professor Cowman has studied *Plasmodium falciparum*, the parasite that causes the most deadly form of human malaria. Each year more than 400 million people contract malaria, and more than one million people, mostly children, die from the disease. "Malaria presents an enormous health burden but also has a major impact on social and economic development in countries where the disease is endemic," Professor Cowman said. "New therapies are urgently needed."

Professor Cowman's research has led to better understanding of how the malaria parasite evades the human immune system as well as anti-malarial drugs. It has also revealed much about how the malaria parasite invades and remodels the human red blood cell. Collectively, this knowledge is being used to identify vaccine and drug candidates against malaria.

As a recipient of the Howard Taylor Ricketts award Professor Cowman will give a named lecture on his research to staff of the University of Chicago's Division of Biological Sciences and School of Medicine in May 2010. He also receives US\$10,000 and a medal.

The lecture will have special significance next year as 2010 marks the 100-year anniversary of Howard Taylor Ricketts' premature death. Dr Ricketts, after demonstrating that Rocky Mountain spotted fever is transferred to man by ticks, described the small bipolar bodies that cause the disease. Later he found – at the cost of his life – the related organism that causes typhus fever.

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