

News

European Science Awards honour 'the best that Europe has to offer'

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'You represent the best that Europe has to offer. We are proud of you,' European Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik told the winners of the 2007 European Science Awards at the awards ceremony in Brussels on 12 March.

The winners included experts in the mysterious dark energy, a team developing molecular motors, climate experts, medical researchers and an economist. This year the award ceremony featured three prizes: the Descartes Prize for Transnational Collaborative Research, the Marie Curie Excellence Awards and the Science Communication Prize.

The Descartes Prize recognises cross-border research teams that have achieved exceptional scientific breakthrough as a result of collaborative work. This year the €1.36 million prize was shared by three projects. By studying the major food pathogen listeria, the VIRLIS initiative has developed new approaches to combating both old and new health threats at a time when the effectiveness of antibiotics is on the wane.

The SYNANOMOTORS project is working to develop synthetic motors on the molecular scale, while the EPICA project has used ice cores from Antarctica to boost our understanding of how the Earth's climate has evolved over the last 800,000 years.

The Marie Curie Excellence Awards are given to scientists who excel in their field and who have, at some point in their career, benefited from the EU's Marie Curie support schemes which encourage researcher mobility. Each winner receives a prize of €50,000.

This year's five winners included an economist for the first time. Professor Luisa Corrado of the University of Cambridge is interested in the impact of economic growth on our wellbeing. She plans to use the prize money to refine her research methodology and organise events on this important topic.

Another winner was Robert Nichol of the University of Portsmouth in the UK. The astronomer is fascinated by dark energy, the mysterious substance which appears to be responsible for the fact that the expansion of the universe is accelerating, not slowing down as was once thought. For him, the Marie Curie grant which helped him go back to the UK after a spell in the US had great personal significance. Six months after his return, his mother died, and had he remained in the US, he would never have been able to spend as much time with her in the last months of her life.

Valerie O'Donnell of Cardiff University in the UK won her award for her pioneering work on the role of free radicals in the body. While free radicals are damaging in some situations, they are essential for a number of key biological processes such as the maintenance of blood pressure. She plans to use her prize money to join a scheme set up by one of last year's winners.

'Wendy Sadler has a spin-out company from Cardiff University called Science Made Simple,' Dr O'Donnell told CORDIS News. The company does outreach work in schools, in the media and on television with the aim of demonstrating that scientists are not all 'old men in brown suits with beards and glasses'. 'I think you'll agree that we don't all look like that,' she said wryly.

Andrea Ferrari carried out his Marie Curie sponsored PhD at Cambridge, UK, where he is still based today. In addition to the Marie Curie prize, he is also a recipient of one of the first European Research Council grants, which will enable him to carry on his research into carbon nanotubes for the next five years.

Finally, Batu Erman benefited from a Marie Curie reintegration grant to return to his native Turkey after spending 17 years in the US. The grant, together with funds from the Turkish government, enabled him to set up a top class immunology lab in the country. 'I want to train a new generation of young Turkish molecular biologists,' he said.

Two of the Science Communication Awards involved astronomy. Frenchman Jean-Pierre Luminet took the Best Science Communicator award. The astrophysicist uses exhibitions, novels, music and the plastic arts to bring his subject to a wider public.

The Best Audiovisual Documentary prize went to Peter Leonard, who wrote, produced and directed a documentary called 'Most of our Universe is missing' for the BBC's science series Horizon. The programme managed to explain abstract and theoretical aspects of cosmology in a clear and entertaining way.

Finally, Delphine Grinberg won the award for Best Science Writer for her books, which help young children learn about the world around them through simple experiments that can be carried out in the home. Each Science Communication Award winner received a cheque for €60,000.

Meanwhile, one of last year's award winners, Eoin Gill of CALMAST in Ireland, described the impact the science communication award had had on his work. 'It really motivates you and keeps you going, and I think you start setting higher standards for yourself,' he told CORDIS News. 'From an organisational point of view, it certainly opens doors for us and people listen to what we're saying.'

For more information, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-awards/index_en.htm [http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-awards/index_en.htm]

<http://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/index.htm> [<http://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/index.htm>]

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