



Volume 37

Passing of the Gavel



Dear SMR family,

Well, here it is. My final letter as President of this awesome society. What a tough two years over which to preside, but with the help of my amazing colleagues, it was manageable! I want to especially thank our executive committee, Drs. Mike Davies, Liz Patton, Georgina Long and Anja Bosserhoff, as well as Deb Marshall and Sarah Hughes from Site Solutions who made everything move smoothly.

I have learned so much in these past two years. I have learned what an amazing community of physicians and scientists we are, paired with a community of true advocates, and foundations, who all want to work together for the greater good, and towards a common goal, curing melanoma. This pandemic has highlighted that like nothing else ever could: in a time of great adversity our community banded together to ensure that no-one was left behind. This is highlighted in the monthly international melanoma networking meeting put together by Chris Marine and Eleonora Leucci and colleagues, that brings together dozens of researchers from all over the world each month, and is 100% a community grass roots event, where many of us gather to share our unpublished data and get feedback from our colleagues. It is

highlighted in the diversity initiatives many in our community are taking. Most importantly, it is highlighted in the exceptional scientific output we have seen, where, even in a pandemic, melanoma research has continued at a very high level. Important discoveries made by our melanoma researchers span the gamut of scientific research from the microbiome (multiple studies in *Nature* by the Wargo Lab, Samuels Lab and others) to oncogenic competence driven by developmental programming of chromatin (White Lab, *Science*), to the development of new platforms such as AstroPath (Taube Lab, *Science*), and so many more. In the last year alone 47 publications in *Cell*, *Science* and *Nature* have been from the laboratories of melanoma researchers, and many of those are members of our Society. This continued commitment to collaboration, innovation and scientific excellence is the cornerstone of our Society and reflected in the agenda of this year's full virtual meeting.

Our meeting organizers, Drs. Davies, Adams, Luke, Holmen, Villanueva, Rizos, Marine, White and Brady have been hard at work to provide an agenda chockfull of innovative science, aimed at answering important questions such as how resistance to immunotherapy develops, and how to overcome it. I am particularly excited for the diversity panel this year run by a group of our very talented faculty- Drs. Jessie Villanueva, Vito Rebecca, Rebecca Lee, Jennifer McQuade and Allison Betof Warner. Thank you those who filled out the survey, the responses have been quite eye-opening! I hope that this session will continue to have the immense impact on our community that it has had almost since its inception.

With that, I will take my leave as President, passing the torch on to Mike Davies, who has already proved to be a reliable, and conscientious steward of this Society. I wish that my tenure had not been in a pandemic, and I wish I had been able to achieve more initiatives, rather than just keeping our heads above water. But I could not be any prouder to have served this amazing Society as your President, which was a dream of mine from almost from the very start. Thank you for allowing me to live that dream, and I encourage you all as I always do to be kind to one another (and yourselves!), do great science, and collaborate, collaborate, collaborate! We are stronger together, always. ~ Ashi

2021 Election Delay

There has been a temporary delay with this year's Society for Melanoma Research election. Look for your ballot at the end of November.

Exciting New Changes for SMR Young Investigators In 2022!

There is exciting information to announce regarding the **Christopher J. Marshall** and the SMR annual **Young Investigator** awards. From their inception both awards have been chosen from nominations submitted by the SMR membership. Although the past nominees have been stellar representatives of the young professionals in the Melanoma field the Executive Committee felt that the nomination process was limiting the number of deserving candidates that were being brought to their attention.

Through the generous financial support of the Melanoma Research Foundation (MRF) each of these awards include a \$5000 cash prize. To make these financial awards more accessible to early career professionals the SMR leadership has decided to change the selection process from nomination to application. Beginning in 2022 young investigators who wish to be considered for the award will no longer need to be nominated, and instead will be able to directly apply for both awards.

The application process will run from May 1st through July 31st of each year. Young investigators will be required to submit a recent CV or Bio Sketch including listings of their published works, two letters of professional recommendation and a brief 300-word summary of why they feel their work is important to melanoma research.

SMR is dedicated to supporting diversity and inclusion for all our members. We encourage applications from any individual who is within 5 years of receiving their terminal degree and especially encourage those in underrepresented populations to apply for these awards.

Winners of the awards receive a cash prize, will be invited to attend the annual SMR Congress, and

they will be recognized at the annual awards ceremony.

SMR 2021 Annual Young Investigator Award Winners



Christopher J. Marshall Award

Sponsored by

the Melanoma Research Foundation

Carla Daniela Robles-Espinoza, PhD



Carla Daniela Robles-Espinoza is an assistant professor at the International Laboratory for Human Genome Research (LIIGH), National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), a Newton Advanced Fellow at the Academy of Medical Sciences, UK, and an international fellow at the Wellcome Sanger Institute, UK. She studied a BSc in genome sciences at UNAM and a PhD in cancer genetics at the University of Cambridge, under the supervision of Dr David Adams. Her current research focuses on using large-scale sequencing data for investigating the driver alterations, risk factors and potential therapeutic targets of types of cancer important in Mexico and Latin America, such as acral lentiginous melanoma and hepatocellular carcinoma.

SMR Young Investigator Award

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James Willmott, PhD



Senior lecturer **James Wilmott** is the research leader of the Translational Melanoma Research Group of the Melanoma Institute Australia. Dr Wilmott is a current holder of an NHMRC early career fellowship and received his PhD in 2013 from the University of Sydney. Dr Wilmott is recognised internationally as an emerging expert in clinical implications of genomic profiles (First author Nature and Int J Cancer), immune profiling of cancer tissue (Co-author in Nature, The Lancet Oncology, senior author in Clinical Cancer Research and Oncoimmunology) and in biomarkers of response of systemic therapies (Senior author Cancer Cell). Dr Wilmott has amassed over 169 publications since 2016 in the top medical journals, including: twice in Nature, twice in Nature Cancer, once in Cell, twice in Lancet Oncology, once in Cancer Cell and eleven times in Clinical Cancer Research and six times in Nature communications. With over 18,230 citations, with 43 articles with >100 citations and a H-index of 56. As a translational research scientist, Dr Wilmott has worked closely with clinical groups to identify areas of need, find a solution and work to implement findings into improved patient outcomes.

***Society for Melanoma Research
Annual Awards
Lifetime Achievement
Antoni Ribas, MD, PhD***



Antoni Ribas, MD, PhD, is professor of Medicine, professor of Surgery and professor of Molecular and Medical Pharmacology at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Director of the Tumor Immunology Program at the Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, Director of the Parker Institute for Cancer Immunotherapy Center at UCLA and Chair of the Melanoma Committee at SWOG. Dr. Ribas is a physician-scientist who conducts laboratory and clinical research in malignant melanoma, focusing on gene engineered

T-cells, PD-1 blockade and BRAF targeted therapies. His National Cancer Institute (NCI), State of California and private foundation-supported research laboratory develops models of disease to test new therapeutic options, studies mechanism of action of treatments in patients and the molecular mechanisms of therapy resistance. He is an elected member of the American Society of Clinical Investigation, the recipient of an AACR Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award and a NCI Outstanding Investigator Award.

***Outstanding Research Award
Thomas Gajewski, MD, PhD***



Dr. Gajewski directs the Melanoma Oncology Clinic and leads the Immunology and Cancer Program of the University of Chicago Comprehensive Cancer Center. The focus of his work is on understanding fundamental aspects of anti-tumor immunity and advancing these concepts into clinical studies in patients. His group defined the T cell-inflamed/non-T cell-inflamed tumor microenvironment phenotypes and contributed to targeting negative regulatory pathways as a therapeutic. Studies of innate immune pathways have led to STING agonist development, currently in clinical testing. Genomic characterization of non-T cell-inflamed tumors has revealed oncogene pathways that mediate T cell exclusion, including the Wnt/ β -catenin pathway. Recent work has also identified germline polymorphisms and a role for the commensal microbiota in immunotherapy efficacy, suggesting additional novel ways to facilitate improved outcomes. Dr. Gajewski received the William B. Coley Award, the ESMO award in Immuno-oncology, and was inducted into the American Association of Physicians. He is scientific co-founder of Jounce Therapeutics and Pyxis Oncology.

Estella Medrano Lecture Award

Jennifer Wargo, MD, MMSc



Dr. Wargo is a Professor of Surgical Oncology and Genomic Medicine and a co-leader of the Melanoma Moon Shot at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. She has made remarkable contributions to the fight against cancer and continues to break new ground in search of more effective therapies. Her career commitment is to advance the understanding and treatment of disease through science.

Dr. Wargo received her medical degree from Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1998 and earned a Master of Science in medical science from Harvard University. After completing her medical degree, she entered surgical residency training at the Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School where she became interested in the biology and treatment of cancer. During her training, she completed two fellowships in surgical oncology with a focus on immunotherapy for cancer. She was recruited to the Division of Surgical Oncology at Massachusetts General Hospital in 2008 and had an active research laboratory focusing on melanoma tumorigenesis and immunotherapy.

There is still time to register!



[Click Here](#)

Other Honors and Awards

Ashani Weeraratna Named to President Biden's National Cancer Advisory Board

SMR President and Johns Hopkins scientist **Ashani Weeraratna, PhD**, a leading cancer researcher who specializes in melanoma and the effects of aging on cancer, has been appointed by President Joe Biden to serve as a member of the National Cancer Advisory Board. The White House announced the appointment on September 15.

The National Cancer Advisory Board advises and assists the director of the National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health on the activities of the national cancer program. Individuals are selected from among leading representatives in health and science, along with leaders in public policy, law, health policy, economics, management, and the environment. Among its activities, the National Cancer Advisory Board reviews grant applications for research, training, health care information, and programs for cancer patients and their families.

In addition to serving as the SMR President, Ashi is the E.V. McCollum Chair of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, a Bloomberg Distinguished Professor, co-leader of the Cancer Invasion and Metastasis Program at the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins, and a professor of oncology at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. She joined the Johns Hopkins faculty in 2019.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/president-biden-appoints-members-to-national-cancer-advisory-board/>

Georgina Long wins inaugural Outstanding Female Researcher Medal

SMR Past President **Georgina Long** working to drive melanoma cancer deaths down to zero has been recognised with the **Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences inaugural Outstanding Female Researcher Medal**.

Professor Long has been awarded for her transformative work advancing melanoma treatments and improving patient outcomes.

“One thing my mother always said was: try and make a difference to many,” Professor Long said.

“The future looks bright – I truly believe that we will get to zero deaths from melanoma with the trajectory we’re following.”

Professor Long is Co-Medical Director of Melanoma Institute Australia (MIA), where she leads a clinical trials team and lab.

The University of Colorado Center for Rare Melanomas receives funding for a clinical trial specific to patients with mucosal melanoma

Please join us in congratulating **Martin McCarter**, MD, **Kasey Coutts**, PhD, and **Theresa Medina**, MD on recently being awarded a clinical trial grant titled “Oral Decitabine/Cedazuridine (DEC-C) in Combination with Nivolumab as a Strategy to Enhance the Efficacy of Immune Checkpoint Blockade in Unresectable or Metastatic Mucosal Melanoma” from the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) in collaboration with Taiho Oncology, Inc.

This trial is based on Dr. Coutts' preclinical research and will combine an oral tablet form of decitabine, a hypomethylating agent, with Nivolumab as a strategy to improve anti-PD1 immunotherapy efficacy specifically in patients with advanced mucosal melanoma. This will be the first clinical trial launched at the CU Center for Rare Melanomas, a joint clinical and research center dedicated to the understanding and treatment of rare, non-sun related types of melanoma including mucosal, acral, and uveal.

Eric D. Whitman, MD, FACS was named Interim Chief Research Officer for Atlantic Health System in May 2021.

Megan Insko just started a position as a lab-based basic science Principal Investigator in the Molecular Cellular Oncology Division at Dana Farber Cancer Institute. She is a Melanoma physician and a researcher who uses zebrafish models and human melanoma cell lines to identify novel drug targets for melanoma. Her lab will focus on RNA quality control mechanisms in melanoma.

Award of the 2021 MRFBC-BMS Young Investigator Team Award

Congratulations to **Didem Cobanoglu**, PhD (Mentor: **James Allison, PhD**) recipient of the 2021 Melanoma Research Foundation Breakthrough Consortium- Bristol-Myers-Squibb (MRFBC-BMS) Young Investigator Research Team Award to Advance the Field of Translational Immuno-Oncology. Dr. Cobanoglu is an Odyssey Fellow at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. With Co-PIs Murat Can Cobanoglu, PhD, UT Southwestern (Mentor: Gaudenz Danuser, PhD) and Satwik Rajaram, PhD, UT Southwestern (Mentor: James Malter, MD), their proposal entitled, *Control of Anti-Tumor Response by the Modulation of Neurotransmitter-Expressing Immune Cells* strives to enhance patient response to immunotherapy.

Inaugural Exceptional Scholar Awards – Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai is pleased to announce the recipients of their inaugural Exceptional Scholar Awards. They are Reymundo Lozano, MD and **Maria S. Sosa, PhD**. These awards are a part of Mount Sinai’s commitment to tangibly support diverse scholars. They invite Assistant Professors from diverse backgrounds and with independent research programs to apply for internal funding, mentoring, and other support to help their careers.

Employment Opportunities

A funded postdoctoral research associate position in the Bernstein lab (<https://labs.ichn.mssm.edu/bernsteinlab/>) at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and Tisch Cancer Institute is available immediately. The Bernstein lab studies epigenetic regulation of gene expression and chromatin structure in cancer and development, with the long-term goal of understanding targetable chromatin changes in cancer.

The successful applicant will be part of a highly productive research team studying chromatin remodeling proteins and transcription factors in melanoma, with direct translational applicability. Applicants should be highly motivated and driven to study cancer epigenetics ideally with the following qualifications:

-Protein biochemistry including protein purification, mass spectrometry sample prep and data analysis,

and protein immunoprecipitation -Cell culture, CRISPR-mediated genomic editing, cancer-relevant cell phenotypic assays -RNA-seq, CUT&RUN/ChIP-seq, ATAC-seq, and NGS analysis -Ability to produce and handle large data sets and extract key information from them -Bonus if experienced in drug or genomic screening (e.g. CRISPR screens)

The successful candidate will have the ability to think deeply about a problem and test it experimentally, demonstrate strong verbal and written communication skills, and be highly collaborative and a team player.

The successful candidate will be part of a thriving and diverse academic environment in the Department of Oncological Sciences within the Tisch Cancer Institute. The position offers competitive salary, subsidized postdoc-housing and exposure to a rich environment at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and the New York City area. Interested candidates should send their CV and three letters of recommendation to: emily.bernstein@mssm.edu

LMCB, the Laboratory for Molecular Cancer Biology (<https://vib.be/labs/marine-lab>) headed by **Professor Jean-Christophe Marine**, is located on the University Hospital Campus, Leuven, Belgium, and part of the VIB Center for Cancer Biology and KU Leuven department of Oncology.

We are a dynamic research team leveraging cutting-edge technologies to better understand melanoma biology. We have a particular interest in intra-tumor heterogeneity and its link to therapy resistance & metastatic dissemination. The implementation of single-cell technologies and the integration of single-cell multi-omics, including spatial/imaging, datasets are revolutionizing cancer research. We apply these technologies routinely in our lab and have generated large and unique datasets. We are now looking for a post-doctoral researcher to integrate our bio-informatics team and exploit these rich datasets. This is the link: <https://jobso.id/e3am>

Cedars-Sinai is seeking a **Senior Research Scientist in Cutaneous Oncology and Melanoma Therapeutics**. The faculty member will develop a comprehensive translational research program focusing on the pathophysiology, prevention, detection and treatment of primary and metastatic

melanoma. Our group has established a high-volume, internationally recognized program led by Dr. Mark Faries and Dr. Omid Hamid of Cedars-Sinai Cancer at The Angeles Clinic and Research Institute. The faculty member will work closely with the medical and surgical directors and investigators across our health system to leverage our established biobank and clinical volume to perform paradigm-shifting investigative research with the goal of establishing and validating new prognostic and predictive biomarkers and novel therapies to advance standard of care. Faculty appointment will be at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and rank will be commensurate with experience.

<https://bit.ly/3FYOXAr>

Candidates should send their CV and a cover letter to Dr. Dan Theodorescu, Cedars-Sinai Cancer Director c/o AcademicRecruiting@cshs.org.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

The Melanoma Research Foundation's (MRF's) Request for Proposals (RFP) for its 2022 Medical Student research grants in melanoma is now available. If you know of an interested medical student, please alert them to this opportunity. Additional information is available on the MRF website, <https://melanoma.org/research-science/research-grants/research-grant-rfps/>. Please note: the deadline for submission is November 15th, 2021 at 5pm ET.

SEEKING EDITORS FOR SMR NEWSLETTER

The Society is seeking trainees interested in becoming more involved with the Society. We are currently seeking trainees from across the globe to help edit the quarterly newsletter. Individuals who successfully meet the editorial deadline for their issue will receive a complimentary registration to the next SMR conference. If you are interested in learning more, please email Debra Marshall at info@societymelanomaresearch.org.