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UA Researcher Earns Presidential Award for Work on Hidden Virus

Felicia Goodrum was the only professor in Arizona to receive the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers.

By University Communications
July 9, 2009



Felicia Goodrum

The White House announced today that a University of Arizona researcher has won a top national honor for her work on a potentially deadly virus that affects the majority of people on Earth.

Felicia Goodrum, assistant professor in the departments of immunobiology and molecular and cellular biology and a member of the BIO5 Institute and Arizona Cancer Center, received the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, the highest honor bestowed by the U.S. government on young professionals in the early stages of their independent research careers.

PECASE winners will receive up to a five-year research grant, and will be honored later this year at a White House ceremony.

Goodrum was among 100 young researchers and engineers receiving the award.

While unsure yet of the details of the award, Goodrum said, "It's very exciting to be going to the White House and meeting President Barack Obama."

Goodrum, 39, who has been doing research at the UA for three years, is looking at how human cytomegalovirus, or HCMV, survives in the body in a latent state.

The virus is found in about 60 percent of people in the United States and up to 99 percent of people living in less developed nations, she said.

The virus can prove lethal for people with immune system problems or who have had transplant surgeries, she said.

"This is potentially a killer," she said. "The immune system is constantly suppressing the virus. People undergoing a transplant or cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy do not have immune systems as active as normal."

Unlike many viruses, like colds and the flu that have a short lifespan, HCMV can exist throughout the life of its host.

Goodrum is studying the viral co-existence, or the molecular interactions going on that allow the virus to survive.

To date three proteins have been discovered that Goodrum believes are working together to establish the virus' latency.

"We have identified some novel proteins we know the virus is making," she said. "These proteins are letting the virus persist. These proteins will allow us to look at the mechanism behind that."

The ultimate goal is to develop a therapy to kill the virus, even while hidden in its latent, inactive state, she said.

"I hope this will lead to an antiviral that is far more effective for the people who need it," Goodrum said.

The PECASE program was launched in 1996 to recognize and nurture some of the finest scientists and engineers who during their early research careers show exceptional potential for leadership at the frontiers of scientific knowledge.

"These extraordinarily gifted young scientists and engineers represent the best in our country," President Barack Obama said in a news release issued by the White House. "I am

et cetera











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