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News Release

University of Pennsylvania mRNA Pioneers Awarded the Princess of Asturias Award

Drew Weissman and Katalin Karikó receive prestigious honor for their foundational research that led to development of two lifesaving mRNA COVID-19 vaccines

June 24, 2021

PHILADELPHIA – [Drew Weissman, MD, PhD](#), and [Katalin Karikó, PhD](#), the pair of researchers from the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania whose innovative mRNA research laid the foundation for development of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines being deployed across the globe, have been named among recipients of the [2021 Princess of Asturias Award for Technical and Scientific Research](#).

The honor, from the Princess of Asturias Foundation (Fundación Princesa de Asturias), a Spanish non-profit organization, is conferred to individuals and organizations whose work makes significant contributions to humanity through scientific, technical, cultural, social and humanitarian work. Winners receive a prize of 50,000 Euros, and the recognition will be officially bestowed in October 2021 in Oviedo, Spain, during a ceremony presided over by their Majesties King Felipe and Queen Letizia of Spain, accompanied by HRH Princess of Asturias Leonor.



Drew Weissman, MD, PhD, and Katalin Karikó, PhD

Weissman, the Roberts Family Professor of Vaccine Research in the [Perelman School of Medicine](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, and Karikó, an adjunct professor of Neurosurgery at the Perelman School of Medicine at Penn and a senior vice president at BioNTech, published research in 2005 showing how to specifically alter one of the building blocks of mRNA in order to increase its therapeutic potential. These findings and other mRNA discoveries from the two scientists, including how to effectively deliver mRNA using vaccination, were crucial to the development of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines created by BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna.

"We are proud of Dr. Weissman's and Dr. Kariko's monumental achievements in mRNA science and congratulate them on this outstanding honor, which is a fitting recognition of the global impact of their commitment to innovative, lifesaving science," said [J. Larry Jameson, MD, PhD](#), executive vice president of the University of Pennsylvania for the Health System and the dean of the Perelman School of Medicine. "Their accomplishments in labs at Penn are exemplars of scientific efforts that begin with bold ideas and go on, through time and intensive vision and fortitude, to change the world."

This year's other recipients of the Princess of Asturias Award include Philip Felgner, Uğur Şahin, Özlem Türeci, Derrick Rossi and Sarah Gilbert, each of whom have independently contributed to the development of some of the COVID-19 vaccines in use to fight the pandemic across the world.

The Princess of Asturias Foundation, established in 1980, as a private non-profit institution whose essential aims are to contribute to extolling and promoting those scientific, cultural and humanistic values that form part of the universal heritage of humanity and consolidate the existing links between the Principality of Asturias and the title traditionally held by the heirs to the Crown of Spain. The heir to the Crown, Her Royal Highness The Princess Leonor de Borbón y Ortiz, serves as the current honorary president of the organization.

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