



VA Physician Wins Coveted Career Award

By Billy House
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The competition was keen, including the scientist who won the 2006 Nobel Prize in physics for confirming the big-bang theory.

But it was David Vesely, of Tampa's James A. Haley VA Medical Center, who emerged Wednesday night as the winner of a prestigious public service career achievement award at a ritzy black-tie gala in Washington.

"I must have gotten lucky," says Vesely, 64, the center's chief of endocrinology, diabetes and metabolism. Vesely is also a professor of medicine, molecular pharmacology and physiology at the University of South Florida College of Medicine.

Far from luck, Vesely's career has been one of long hours in medical research labs, leading to breakthroughs in battling heart failure and kidney failure. The breast cancer death in 2002 of Vesely's wife, Clo, only spurred the Tampa Palms father of five into what is yet more groundbreaking work in fighting the disease.

Vesely is an "amazing person" with great integrity "who has always been sort of an unsung hero," said Gerald Levey, vice chancellor of Medical Services at UCLA and dean of the university's David Geffen School of Medicine.

The 2007 Service to America Career Achievement Medal goes to a federal employee for a lifetime of public-service achievement. It is one of several medals that are known as "Sammies" - others go to winners in such areas as homeland security and international affairs - presented annually since 2002 by the nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service. The medal is accompanied by a \$10,000 award, which Vesely said he intends to give to a charity.

Max Stier, the partnership's president, says Vesely "combines an uncommon commitment to serving others with enormous intellect, which has put him on the cusp of scientific discoveries that could improve the lives of countless individuals."

Vesely follows last year's career achievement medal winner, who was a Nobel Prize winner in physics. This year, other medal finalists were James Webb, a 2006 Nobel Prize winner in physics and a scientist at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Silver Spring, Md., whose research helped to confirm the big-bang theory, and Walter Oleszek, a Congressional Research Service specialist who has provided advice to Congress and emerging democracies on the legislative process.

Medical Discoveries Win Night

It was Vesely's medical breakthroughs, though, that took the night.

The son of a dentist, who even as a Nebraska youngster was known by friends as "Doc," Vesely's career includes the discovery in 1987 of three peptide hormones made by the heart that, because of their ability to reduce blood pressure and increase excretion of salt, has greatly benefited the treatments of congestive heart failure and kidney failure.

Then his wife died.

"So I turned all my research into cancer," Vesely said.

He knew that those hormones also kept the heart from growing too big. "So it was not a big jump to think it might help cancer cells," he said.

Vesely since has found that two of the heart-produced hormones he discovered are capable of eliminating two out of three human breast carcinomas growing in mice. A third type was eliminated by 50 percent.

The treatment with peptide hormones "completely cured 80 percent of in the mice; they live a normal lifespan and never die of cancer," Vesely said. Even those not cured live while getting ongoing treatment.

"We haven't done any humans yet," Vesely said. But a bio-tech company in California just signed an agreement with USF to try to line up funding to take his research to that next phase, he said.

UCLA's Levey said this week that Vesely's achievements have been no small feat in the medical world.

"What he did with that research was to help physicians better understand congestive heart failure and the complex adaptations [that] occur in the body ... and he also was extraordinarily innovative and tenacious in developing an assay for these peptides so it is now possible to diagnose congestive heart failure very, very early on," Levey said.

He said Vesely's newer work giving peptides a role in battling cancer is showing to have "great potential."

Along with his research, Vesely regularly sees and treats VA patients in Tampa.

'Positive Light' For VA

While Vesely said the award is a big deal for him, he said he's also happy for the Department of Veterans Affairs. He said he hopes the recognition of his work will give the agency some "positive light" after the patient-neglect scandals at Walter Reed Medical Center, and also will show that VA can compete against the National Institutes of Health for research dollars.

National Service to America Medals sponsors include founding sponsor Siemens and DuPont. Winners were selected by a committee that included Sen. John Warner, R-Va., and Dan Glickman, Motion Picture Association of America chairman and chief executive.