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Renowned Medical Scientist Tasuku Honjo to Speak at UC San Diego March 15

Recipient of the 2016 Kyoto Prize, Honjo has been described as initiating a historic turning point—a “penicillin moment”—in the fight against cancer

World-renowned medical scientist Tasuku Honjo, MD, PhD, will speak at the University of California San Diego at 10 a.m. on March 15, as part of the annual Kyoto Prize Symposium.

Honjo received the 2016 Kyoto Prize—Japan’s highest private award for global achievement—in the area of “Basic Sciences” for his contributions to medical science, including the identification of several important immunoregulatory molecules which has led to the development of effective cancer immunotherapy. He also illuminated the mechanism for the functional diversification of antibodies by clarifying Class Switch Recombination and its responsible enzyme, AID.

The Kyoto Prize Symposium will feature the public talk by Honjo in the Price Center East Ballroom on the UC San Diego campus. In addition, UC San Diego will bring high school students—many from underserved areas of the region—to campus for the talk. The goal is to introduce them to the university and the idea of pursuing a career in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.



Tasuku Honjo

“UC San Diego is honored to participate once again in the Kyoto Prize Symposium,” said Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “This international event honors those who contribute greatly to scientific progress, cultural advancement and human betterment, while bringing together some of the world’s top scientists and artists to inspire the next generation of future leaders and innovators.”

Honjo’s work has been described as initiating a historic turning point—a “penicillin moment”—in the fight against cancer. His discovery of the immunoregulatory molecule PD-1 has led to a new class of cancer drugs that unleash the body’s own immune system against cancer. PD-1 is a protein produced on the surface of some T-cells and can be thought of as the “brakes” of the immune system; the protein helps keep the immune system from running out of control and attacking normal, healthy cells. If PD-1 could be blocked, Honjo posed, then perhaps a patient’s own immune system could be used against cancer cells. Today, PD-1 inhibitors such as the drugs nivolumab and pembrolizumab are showing promise for more effective treatment of certain types of cancer, such as melanoma.

Honjo is a professor emeritus at the University of Kyoto in Japan. For his work, he has received the prestigious Tang Prize, the Coley Award for Distinguished Research, the Smalley Memorial Award for Immunotherapy and Cancer and the Imperial Prize of the Japan Academy. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and has served as a fellow at both the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

Honjo’s presentation is one in the three-part Kyoto Prize Symposium hosted jointly by UC San Diego with the University of San Diego, San Diego State University and Point Loma Nazarene University. In addition to Honjo, the 2016 Kyoto Prize laureates include:

- In “Advanced Technology,” Takeo Kanade, a world-leading roboticist recognized for his contributions to the theory of computer vision. He has introduced a series of landmark technologies in robotics, including automated driving, medical robotics and computer-assisted surgery. He will speak at San Diego State University at 2 p.m. on March 15.
- In “Arts and Philosophy,” Martha Craven Nussbaum, one of the world’s preeminent philosophers. Author of more than a dozen major books, she is best known as a champion of the “Capabilities Approach”—the effort to incorporate the concept of individual human capabilities into the criteria for social justice. She will present at the University of San Diego at 10:30 a.m. on March 16.

Established by the Inamori Foundation in 1984, the Kyoto Prize strives to honor significant contributions to the scientific, cultural and spiritual betterment of humankind. The president of this nonprofit organization is Kazuo Inamori, founder and chairman emeritus of Kyocera and KDDI Corporation.

The March 15 talk with Honjo will take place in UC San Diego's Price Center East Ballroom from 10 to 11:30 a.m. For more information, please visit www.kyotoprizeusa.org.

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