

Awards showcase Australia's promising future in bio-sciences

The six state winners of the AusBiotech/GSK Student Excellence Awards, announced today, will next week compete for the national biosciences research award at AusBiotech 2011.

AusBiotech and GlaxoSmithKline hold the annual competition as a key initiative to encourage more students to pursue research and careers in bio-sciences and to reward early-career successes, recognising high achievement, unique work and innovations.

“We created these awards with the aim of making bio-sciences more attractive and to help young, promising scientists boost their careers at a critical time,” says Dr Anna Lavelle, CEO of AusBiotech. “It is a surprising paradox that Australia has an innovative and successful history of bio-scientific discoveries including the bionic ear and the [cervical cancer vaccine](#), yet fewer Australian young people are entering science. We need to reward those who do make the decision to devote their lives to research.”

Dr Camilla Chong, Medical Director of GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) Australia, who sponsor the Awards said: “We’re a company with a strong history of scientific innovation, which is why we are very proud to support these awards. On behalf of GSK I would like to congratulate all finalists on their achievements thus far.”

This year’s Victorian winner is Ms Lina Happo, from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in **Victoria**. She has uncovered why certain cancers do not respond to conventional [chemotherapy](#), highlighting the potential to predict treatment success or failure in patients with tumours by identifying genetic alterations.

“Winning this award will give me the opportunity to present my research to a wide audience and the opportunity to meet and interact with scientists from across a wide variety of disciplines. This will allow me to create scientific relationships that will be an important part in further developing my career,” said Ms Happo.

The Queensland winner, Jana McCaskill from the University of **Queensland**, Diamantina Institute, is developing a new drug delivery system that achieves efficient delivery of an anti-viral drug to the infected cells in the respiratory system. This potentially offers a superior means to treat acute respiratory viral infections. “I wanted to be involved in an industry that was at the forefront of discovery and to investigate the momentous depth of science that surrounds everyday life for the benefit of society,” said Ms McCaskill. Other state winners include:

NSW: Vidya Perera (University of Sydney), for research into ‘CYP1A2 activity in South Asians and Europeans.’ Variability in response poses a difficult challenge for clinicians when prescribing the correct dose of a medicine to achieve a therapeutic affect and avoid adverse reactions. The drug metabolising enzyme CYP1A2 contributes to the [metabolism](#) of many antipsychotic medications and developing medicines, and demonstrates wide variability,

influenced by common dietary and lifestyle factors. People of South Asian ethnicity have not been previously studied with respect to this enzyme.

South Australia: Jing Jing Wang (Flinders University), for research into ‘*In vitro* anti-skin cancer properties and mechanisms of action of xanthones from the mangosteen pericarp.’ This research has revealed a possibility for novel treatment of skin cancers, a cancer that now represents 30% of newly diagnosed cancers worldwide and is the most common cancer in Australia.

Tasmania: Ramez Alhazzaa (University of Tasmania), for research into ‘Alternative sources of omega-3 in aquaculture.’ Plant oils and plant-derived ingredients are renewable sources and can be included in our diet and have a great potential in replacing fish oil, which is finite.

Western Australia: Foteini Hassiotou (University of Western Australia), and her research colleagues have identified that human breastmilk contains stem cells that behave similarly to embryonic stem cells in culture and which may be used as a non-invasive source of stem cells for innovative therapies.

The six state winners from across Australia will now compete for the national title at the AusBiotech2011 Conference in Adelaide from 16 – 19 October 2011. Winners of the state awards receive payment for travel, accommodation and registration to the conference, where the national winner will be announced, and receive a \$7,000 travel grant to be used to present their research at an international conference. In addition, the national winner’s principal supervisor will receive a \$2,000 research grant.