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# 16 area scientists awarded NIH grants for innovative study

The Boston Globe



Lisa Feldman Barrett, a Boston College professor, won a Pioneer Award.

By Elizabeth Cooney, Globe Correspondent | September 19, 2007

Boston-area scientists made a strong showing in two government grant programs designed to spur innovative medical research in an era of tight federal funding.

Sixteen of 41 winners announced yesterday by the National Institutes of Health are from Greater Boston. Half of this year's 12 recipients of the prestigious Pioneer Award work at Boston-area hospitals or universities and 10 of 29 New Innovator awards are going to investigators in Boston or Cambridge. Pioneer grant winners receive \$2.5 million and New Innovators get \$1.5 million, all over five years.

"I think it's a real testimony to the area," Jeremy M. Berg, director of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences, said in an interview. "Boston is certainly known for having a large number of high-quality educational institutions, like Harvard and MIT, but also many others. These are very much individual-based awards, though, so it's really a reflection of the ability of these institutions to recruit outstanding people."

This is Boston's best showing in the Pioneer competition, now in its fourth year. Only California has come close to Massachusetts' success, accounting for six of the 13 Pioneer winners in 2005. In 2004, Harvard University researchers took home two of nine grants. In 2005, one winner was from Massachusetts, and last year four of 13 scientists were from the state. This is the first year for the New Innovator grants.

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Berg runs the two grant programs under an NIH initiative intended to support bold and unconventional research that could have a big payoff but also has a higher than usual risk of failure and is therefore less likely to receive approval through the traditional grant process.

While the Pioneer awards go to researchers at any point in their careers, the New Innovator awards are limited to scientists who are within 10 years of finishing their doctoral degrees or clinical training and who have not yet won NIH grants for their independent research.

Younger scientists have been waiting longer to get their first grants, from an average age of mid-30s about 10 years ago to their 40s in recent years, a sign of increased competition for government funding for science that has been declining in real dollars. The NIH budget doubled from 1998 to 2003 but has been flat since.

The New Innovator competition drew 2,200 applications, Berg said, compared with 450 for the Pioneer awards.

"We expected there would be a strong response, but not this strong," he said, adding that the number of applicants demonstrates the need for a program that supports riskier work.

"The motivation for the program was to find a good way to get outstanding young scientists funded earlier in their careers and to encourage people to really work on things they were most excited about rather than being conservative" and working on things that have a better chance of getting funded, he said.

Nir Hacohen, of Massachusetts General Hospital, will use his New Innovator award to study how the immune system senses infectious agents and turns on a response specific to viruses, bacteria, or fungi. He said the grants are needed for science to make advances.

"Clearly people are starving for this kind of award," the 40-year-old researcher said.

Konrad Hochedlinger, 31, a scientist at Mass. General and Harvard Stem Cell Institute, said his Innovator award will help him quickly advance his work in the fast-moving field of stem cell research, without having to wait to win a regular NIH grant. He has created a new approach based on work by Japanese scientists to reprogram adult cells into embryonic stem cells.

Lisa Feldman Barrett, a Boston College psychology professor who won a Pioneer grant, will study the neuroanatomy of emotions such as anger and fear, pursuing a theory that does not fit conventional models.

She said the traditional funding process "is a very risk-averse strategy, and if people have limited funds it's a good idea, but it can slow innovation and progress."

These are the other Boston-area winners.

**Pioneer Award:** Dr. Emery N. Brown, Mass. General and Massachusetts Institute of Technology; James J. Collins, Boston University; Takao K. Hensch, Children's Hospital Boston; Dr. Frances E. Jensen, Children's Hospital Boston; Gina Turrigiano, Brandeis University



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**New Innovator Award:** Ed Boyden, MIT; Mehmet Fatih Yanik, MIT; Alan Jasanoff, MIT; Dr. Sarah Fortune, Harvard School of Public Health; Alan Saghatelian, Harvard University; Dr. Levi A. Garraway, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute; Ekaterina Heldwein, Tufts University School of Medicine; Dr. Mark D. Johnson, Brigham and Women's Hospital ■

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