# MD Anderson Launches James P. Allison Institute to Usher in New Era for Immunotherapy

The institute aims to develop new cancer treatments and bring the benefits of immunotherapy to all patients.

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The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center today [March 24] launched the James P. Allison Institute, a visionary research and innovation hub within MD Anderson designed to foster groundbreaking science, to develop new treatments and to bring the benefits of immunotherapy to all patients.

The Allison Institute will advance exceptional discovery, translational and clinical research to integrate immunobiology across disciplines and unlock the full potential of science and medicine for human health. The institute builds upon the legacy of its namesake, James P. Allison, PhD, who was awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his fundamental discoveries in T cell biology and his invention of ipilimumab, the first immune checkpoint inhibitor to treat cancer.

“Immunotherapy has transformed cancer care over the past decade but, unfortunately, not all patients benefit equally. Our goal is to change that,” said Allison, regental chair of Immunology and director of the Allison Institute. “Our vision is to lead the world in immunotherapy research by empowering interdisciplinary scientific excellence and by accelerating discoveries into novel and synergetic therapies that enable cures.”

Unlike the traditional pillars of cancer care — surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and targeted therapies — immunotherapy does not target the tumor directly but instead works to unleash the immune system. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of immunobiology, the institute will develop treatment approaches that effectively integrate these pillars to work in concert and prime immune cells for an anti-tumor response that can eliminate cancer — permanently.

Together with Allison, the institute will be led by renowned experts in immunotherapy and cancer research. Padmanee Sharma, MD, PhD, professor of Genitourinary Medical Oncology and Immunology, will serve as scientific director of the Allison Institute, and Raghu Kalluri, MD, PhD, professor and chair of Cancer Biology, will serve as director of operations.

“Our unique ability to seamlessly integrate fundamental discovery science with translational drug development and impactful clinical research offers an unprecedented opportunity to realize the promise of immunotherapy and to take a critical step toward finally ending cancer,” said Peter WT Pisters, MD, president of MD Anderson. “The Allison Institute is an essential component of our institutional strategy to make the greatest impact on the most people, and I am confident the work of the institute will have a lasting impact on all of humanity.”

## Empowering Scientific Breakthroughs

Jim Allison was not driven initially to discover a new cancer therapy, but rather to understand the mysteries of T cells and the immune system. His curiosity and persistence drove him to groundbreaking discoveries in immune checkpoint proteins. Similarly, discovery research across all disciplines is central to the mission of the Allison Institute.

“We will empower our researchers to make scientific breakthroughs that advance our understanding of immunobiology and enable exciting new therapeutic opportunities,” Sharma said. “Starting with high-impact discovery science, we will follow the evidence toward biological insights, novel treatment targets and innovative new technologies.”

Leveraging the strength of MD Anderson’s drug discovery capabilities and clinical expertise together with strategic biopharma collaborations, the Allison Institute will rapidly advance discoveries from the lab to the clinic and back again, with clinical insights informing ongoing laboratory studies. These efforts will bring both new medicines and tailored combinations that can be evaluated in well-designed studies through MD Anderson’s leading clinical research engine.

To achieve maximum impact, Allison Institute researchers will seek to learn as much as possible from the patients they aim to help. Cutting-edge data science will generate unparalleled insights from clinical trials in real time. Employing the reverse translational research model of MD Anderson’s immunotherapy platform, co-led by Allison and Sharma, these insights will guide simultaneous laboratory studies to answer critical questions for future trials.

## Innovative Research Model to Drive Progress

The ambitious goals of the Allison Institute necessitate a unique organizational approach to change the way researchers come together, share ideas and accelerate progress.

“We endeavor to be a worldwide leader in research and innovation, and that requires moving away from the traditional departmental silos toward dynamic teams assembled and reassembled to answer specific questions,” Kalluri said. “By recruiting and engaging the top minds around the world, we will unleash individual brilliance in a collaborative environment.”

The Allison Institute will establish a diverse and inclusive environment with a culture of excellence and innovation. A priority of the institute will be to train and nurture rising stars who will lead the next generation of immunotherapy pioneers, thus ensuring progress is maintained for decades to come.

Allison Institute members will encompass several categories of researchers, including established and rising scientists housed within the institute as well as internal and external scientists contributing to collaborative projects. Project-focused teams will be assembled to integrate expertise across scientific disciplines. As progress is made or new questions are revealed, teams will be reassembled to respond to the evolving scientific landscape.

These teams will have access to the well-established infrastructure already present at MD Anderson, including innovative research platforms, cutting-edge data science efforts and the drug discovery and development capabilities of the Therapeutics Discovery division.

In this context, MD Anderson will make strategic capital investments to establish specialized core facilities and platforms that will support both the work of the institute and MD Anderson priority research efforts. The institute will be housed in state-of-the-art facilities now being constructed on the TMC$^3$ life-science campus and future laboratory space on MD Anderson's south campus.

The strategic direction of the Allison Institute also will be guided by an external scientific advisory board composed of leading experts that have committed to regular evaluations of the research portfolio and programs. The advisory board will be co-led by Robert Schreiber, PhD, the Andrew M. and Jane M. Bursky Distinguished Professor of Pathology and Immunology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, and Elaine Mardis, PhD, co-executive director of the Steve and Cindy Rasmussen institute for Genomic Medicine at Nationwide Children's Hospital and professor of Pediatrics at The Ohio State University College of Medicine.

"The Allison Institute is an exciting, bold, forward-looking and timely development that will bring together outstanding investigators with diverse and cutting-edge expertise closely aligned with the superb clinical and translational engine for which MD Anderson is known," Schreiber said. "When one considers the leadership of the institute and the commitment from MD Anderson, there is no doubt in my mind that the Allison Institute will rapidly become known as the paradigm for cancer research in the world."

A Visionary Future

The Allison Institute is among the most ambitious efforts undertaken by MD Anderson — a testament to the institution's commitment to making a profound and lasting impact on science and medicine.

"MD Anderson has always been committed to conducting the best science possible to achieve impactful breakthroughs, and the Allison Institute will be instrumental to our future success," said Giulio Draetta, MD, PhD, chief scientific officer. "This visionary institute will be unique in the depth, breadth and applicability of its approach to drive all-encompassing therapeutic advances that improve patients' lives."

For more information about the Allison Institute and to view a live stream of the announcement, visit MDAnderson.org/AllisonInstitute.

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Click here to learn more about immunotherapy for cancer.

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