

Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation Invests Nearly \$1.4 million to Support Physician-scientists

The award will fund research on ovarian cancer immunotherapy, immune-related colitis and acute myeloid leukemia.

July 23, 2026 By [Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation](#)

Three exceptional young clinicians with novel ideas about cancer treatment have been named the 2026 recipients of the Damon Runyon Physician-Scientist Training Award. This award provides physicians who have completed clinical specialty fellowship training with the opportunity to become leaders in translational and clinical research. The awardees are selected through a highly competitive and rigorous process by a committee of leading cancer researchers who are themselves physician-scientists.

Physician-scientists are uniquely positioned to translate discoveries in the lab into therapies that improve and prolong the lives of their patients. However, this vital cadre of cancer researchers is dwindling due to financial disincentives that deter physicians from pursuing a research career. Damon Runyon seeks to bolster this pipeline by providing considerably higher funding than most research fellowships—\$100,000 in the first year, with increases of \$10,000 per year over the next three years (\$460,000 total over four years). The Foundation will also retire up to \$100,000 of any medical school debt still owed by an award recipient.

Since its launch in 2015, the program has funded 49 new physician-scientists from across a range of disciplines. Their research has not only brought forth insights into how cancer develops and spreads but also led to the development of new therapies, including several in clinical trials. The Physician-Scientist Training Award was established thanks to the generosity of Damon Runyon Board members Leon Cooperman and Michael Gordon.

2026 Physician-Scientists

Lindsey M. Draper, MD [Leon and Toby Cooperman Physician-Scientist], with mentor Kole T. Roybal, PhD, at University of California, San Francisco

More effective immunotherapies are needed to treat advanced ovarian cancer. While most types of ovarian cancer do not respond well to immunotherapy, the presence of immune cells in ovarian tumors correlates with longer patient survival. A subset of these cells, known as tumor infiltrating lymphocytes (TIL), specifically recognize tumors. However, ovarian TIL are unable to eradicate cancer due to mechanisms of tumor immune evasion and TIL exhaustion. Dr. Draper proposes genetically reprogramming ovarian TIL to better recognize and kill tumors by introducing gene fusions that may enhance TIL persistence in the harsh tumor environment. These potent genetic enhancements will be delivered by a virus engineered to only infect TIL that target tumors, while ignoring bystander TIL that may recognize viruses, healthy human tissues, or other non-cancer targets, thus offering the potential for a safe and effective novel immunotherapeutic for patients with ovarian cancer and other immunotherapy-resistant malignancies.

Michelle N. Ferreira, MD, with mentors Chi V. Dang, MD, PhD, and Cynthia L. Sears, MD, at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Dr. Ferreira seeks to explore dietary, microbial, and metabolic strategies to treat immune-related colitis (ir-colitis), one of the most common autoimmune toxicities resulting from immunotherapy treatment. Ir-colitis results when the patient's immune system becomes overstimulated after immunotherapy and attacks the colon, leading to diarrhea and other gastrointestinal symptoms that can result in discontinuation of potentially life-saving immunotherapy. Although ir-colitis can be treated with steroids and other immunosuppressive agents, it remains unclear whether this immunosuppression may affect treatment. Targeting the gut microbiome through dietary intervention is a promising strategy to treat ir-colitis without interfering with cancer treatment. She plans to use a mouse model of ir-colitis to study whether intermittent fasting can be used to treat ir-colitis while simultaneously improving tumor control. She will investigate the specific metabolic and gut microbial changes that are responsible for fasting's effects on ir-colitis, with the goal of expanding non-immunosuppressive and accessible treatment options for this common immunotherapy toxicity.

Vivian M. Liu, MD [Leon and Toby Cooperman Physician-Scientist], with mentors Stanley C. Lee, PhD, and Soheil Meshinchi, MD, PhD, at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center

This project aims to better understand the biology of acute myeloid leukemia (AML), a blood cancer that affects white blood cells. The most common form of AML in adults involves a specific mutation in a gene known as NPM1. This mutation occurs in a consistent way and drives the growth of leukemia cells. Dr. Liu is investigating how this NPM1 mutation alters the behavior of

leukemia cells and response to drug treatments, with the goal of developing new and more effective treatments for patients with this disease.

This post was originally published by [Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation](http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/daemon-runyon-cancer-research-foundation-invests-nearly-14-million-support-ph). It is republished with permission.

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