

Damon Runyon and St. Jude Invest \$1.8M in Childhood Cancer Research

Meet the newest class of Damon Runyon-St. Jude pediatric cancer research fellows and learn about their cutting-edge projects.

March 18, 2025 By [Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation](#)

The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital have announced their newest class of pediatric cancer research fellows, each of whom will receive funding for four years (\$300,000 total) to support an innovative research project with the potential to significantly impact the diagnosis or treatment of one or more pediatric cancers.

Launched in 2024, the Damon Runyon-St. Jude Pediatric Cancer Research Fellowship aims to address a funding gap that drives top talent to seek more prevalent opportunities in adult cancer research or the pharmaceutical sector. Fellows are selected by a distinguished committee of leaders in the field.

"This partnership between Damon Runyon and St. Jude was created to give the top researchers across the U.S. the support they need to pursue the most promising breakthroughs for children with cancer," said James R. Downing, MD, St. Jude president and CEO. "Whether it's at St. Jude or elsewhere, each advancement in our understanding of childhood cancer moves us closer to realizing our mission of finding cures and saving children everywhere."

In addition to all the benefits associated with a fellowship from Damon Runyon, including the retirement of up to \$100,000 of medical school debt, Pediatric Fellows are invited to attend an annual meeting with their colleagues hosted by the St. Jude Comprehensive Cancer Center. "The selection committee was very enthusiastic about these scientists, who each meet the goals of this important new program," said Yung S. Lie, PhD, President and CEO of Damon Runyon. "We are incredibly grateful to St. Jude for their partnership and confident that this brilliant cohort will make a meaningful impact in pediatric cancer research."

2025 Damon Runyon-St. Jude Pediatric Cancer Research Fellows

Ian Blumenthal, PhD, with his sponsor Jim M. Olson, MD, PhD, at Seattle Children's Research Institute, Seattle

Diffuse midline gliomas (DMG) are uniformly fatal pediatric brain cancers in desperate need of novel treatments. Immunotherapies have offered some hope to patients, but durable clinical success remains elusive, highlighting the enormous challenge of selectively targeting these recalcitrant tumors while preserving healthy tissue. Dr. Blumenthal aims to address this need by building immune cell engagers—molecules that enable a patient's immune cells to recognize and attack their tumor—that are capable of leveraging DMG's inherent variability and immune defense mechanisms into a therapeutic advantage. He hopes that these innovative drug designs will not only provide superior efficacy against pediatric gliomas but also pave the way for next-generation immunotherapies that better address the dynamic nature of tumor biology. Dr. Blumenthal received his PhD from the University of Washington, Seattle and his BA and BE from Dartmouth College, Hanover.

Matthew Decker, MD, PhD, with his sponsor Kevin M. Shannon, MD, at University of California, San Francisco

Acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is hard to cure compared to other childhood leukemias and lymphomas. Current standard-of-care AML treatment is very toxic; childhood AML survivors often have side effects later in life from their treatment, including heart disease, infertility, and additional cancers. There is a pressing need for new AML treatments that are less toxic and more effective. Dr. Decker's research is focused on developing novel inhibitors of a protein called N-Ras, one of the most common mutations in pediatric AML. Dr. Decker hopes by disrupting N-Ras function to sensitize AML to existing therapies and improve outcomes for patients. Dr. Decker received his MD and PhD from Columbia University, New York and his BS from Stanford University, Stanford.

Oriana Miltiadous, MD, with her sponsors Andrew L. Kung, MD, PhD (Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center), and Marcel van den Brink, MD, PhD (City of Hope), at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York

Dr. Miltiadous is investigating how the gut microbiome affects the immune system in children undergoing a cancer treatment called allogeneic hematopoietic cell transplantation (allo-HCT), which is often used for aggressive pediatric cancers like leukemia and lymphoma. While it can be life-saving, allo-HCT can also induce complications caused by immune overactivation, including graft-versus-host disease. Molecules called bile acids, produced with the help of gut microbes, help balance the immune response, reducing harmful inflammation and improving recovery. By identifying specific gut microbes and bile acids that support immune function, Dr. Miltiadous aims to reduce complications, improve survival rates, and enhance the quality of life for children receiving allo-HCT. By analyzing a cohort of over 400 patients, she seeks to uncover actionable insights that could lead to new therapies targeting the gut microbiome. Dr. Miltiadous received her

MD from the University of Athens Medical School, Athens.

Geoffrey Smith, MD, PhD, with his sponsor Tyler Jacks, PhD, at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

In the past decade, new therapies that train the immune system to recognize and kill tumor cells have revolutionized cancer care. Unfortunately, immunotherapies have been largely ineffective in pediatric solid tumors, including osteosarcoma, the most common bone cancer. Dr. Smith aims to understand why immunotherapies have failed by studying a mouse model closely resembling human osteosarcoma. Importantly, these mice have an intact immune system, unlike models that transplant human tumors into mice. By combining complex modeling with single cell and spatial techniques, Dr. Smith hopes to uncover barriers to immune control of osteosarcoma and identify potential therapeutic approaches. Based on these findings, he plans to test novel immunotherapies in the mouse model to prepare for the next generation of osteosarcoma human clinical trials. Dr. Smith received his MD and PhD from the University of California, San Francisco and his BA from Harvard College, Cambridge.

Lara Wahlster, MD, PhD, with her sponsor Vijay G. Sankaran, MD, PhD, at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

Dr. Wahlster is studying the developmental origins of acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), the most common childhood cancer and leading cause of death in children. The goal of Dr. Wahlster's research is to understand the biological processes that drive blood cancer development. Applying innovative genomic tools, her work seeks to decipher how cancer-predisposing genetic variants impact early blood cell development and facilitate the acquisition of secondary genetic changes found in ALL. She aims to leverage these insights to guide the development of novel, mechanism-based treatments. Dr. Wahlster earned her MD and PhD from the University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg.

Tuyu Zheng, PhD, with her sponsor Stephen C. Mack, PhD, at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Memphis

Ependymomas (EPN) are aggressive brain and spinal cord tumors that are especially difficult to treat in children and often come back after treatment. Recent research has shown that interactions between tumor cells and healthy neurons play a key role in EPN growth. It is not well understood, however, how exactly neurons contribute to this process. By mapping the neuronal environment and exploring the different types of neurons involved, Dr. Zheng hopes to uncover the mechanisms that drive EPN growth and find new ways to treat these tumors. Dr. Zheng received her PhD from Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, her MEng and MSc from the University of Technology of Compiègne, Compiègne, and her BEng from Shanghai University, Shanghai.

[This post](#) was originally published by [Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation](#). It is republished

with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/damon-runyon-st-jude-invest-18m-childhood-cancer-research>