

Meet Eight Early Career Cancer Researchers Awarded \$3.2M

The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation announced the recipients of 2026 Damon Runyon-Rachleff Innovation Award.

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The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation has announced eight recipients of the 2026 Damon Runyon-Rachleff Innovation Award, established to support high-risk, high-reward ideas with the potential to significantly impact the prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of cancer. Five extraordinary early-career researchers will receive initial grants of \$400,000 over two years, and each will have the opportunity to receive two additional years of funding (for a potential total of \$800,000). This year, this “Stage 2” continuation support was granted to three current Innovators who demonstrated significant progress on their proposed research during the first two years of the award.

The Innovation Award is designed to provide funding to exceptionally creative thinkers with a revolutionary idea who lack sufficient preliminary data to obtain traditional funding. The awardees are selected through a highly competitive and rigorous process by a scientific committee comprised of leading cancer researchers with their own history of innovative work.

This program was established thanks to the generosity of Andy and Debbie Rachleff.

New 2026 Damon Runyon-Rachleff Innovators

Timour Baslan, PhD, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

“Developing targeted therapeutics in cancer copy number space: reduced gene dosage vulnerabilities”

Many different kinds of mutations affect cancer genomes, but the most recurrent are copy number alterations, resulting in a cancer cell with more or fewer copies of a gene than a normal genome. Dr. Baslan is focused on developing novel therapies that target this class of mutations with an emphasis on deletion events. More specifically, using a combination of advanced algorithms and chemical biology tools, Dr. Baslan is investigating specific vulnerabilities that are associated with deletion events and developing strategies to target these sensitivities in pancreatic cancers. Ultimately, Dr. Baslan aims to explore the generalizability of these therapeutic strategies across

cancers, as the majority of cancer genomes contain recurrent deletions.

Julia C. Carnevale, MD, University of California, San Francisco

“Decoding and reprogramming dendritic cell function for solid tumor immunity”

Many cancers evade immune attack by creating a local environment that suppresses immune cells, thereby preventing sustained anti-tumor responses. Dr. Carnevale’s research focuses on dendritic cells, which play a central role in activating cancer-fighting T cells. She seeks to understand how these cells can be reprogrammed to function within tumors despite suppressive signals. In addition, she plans to develop new approaches to engineer dendritic cells so they can physically and functionally coordinate multiple types of T cells within tumors, strengthening local immune responses. Ultimately, this research aims to uncover new strategies to harness dendritic cells to overcome immune resistance in cancer.

Stephen T. Ferris, PhD, St. Louis University, St. Louis

“Defining the interactions between NKT cells, tumors, and lipid antigens”

While much progress has been made in understanding cancer immune responses, natural killer T (NKT) cells remain understudied. These immune cells act as a bridge between innate and adaptive immunity, rapidly responding to targets through their distinctive receptor. This receptor recognizes lipid molecules, but we currently do not know what tumor lipids can activate NKTs or how NKTs help the immune system attack tumors. Dr. Ferris will investigate how NKTs are involved in the cancer immune response, with the goal of defining how NKT cells are activated by tumor lipids and what those lipids are. This research not only seeks to expand our understanding of fundamental immunological processes but also holds potential to develop immunotherapies to target multiple cancer types using NKT cells.

Evan W. Weber, PhD, The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia

“A discovery platform for engineering T cells that serially kill”

CAR T cell therapy, in which a patient’s own immune cells are reprogrammed to recognize and kill cancer, has revolutionized the treatment of blood cancers. Unfortunately, however, a significant portion of treated patients relapse, and CAR T cell therapy for aggressive solid tumors has been largely ineffective. A major roadblock preventing this therapy from curing more patients is the gradual loss of CAR T cells’ ability to kill tumor cells, which results in tumor progression or relapse. Dr. Weber aims to develop optimized killer CAR T cells that stay in the fight against cancer. His lab has developed a novel, high-throughput method of analysis that can be used to identify T cell characteristics, genes, and other biological features that enable CAR T cells to serially kill cancer cells. These insights will provide a roadmap for reprogramming T cells with enhanced tumor killing function, paving the way for more efficacious CAR T cell therapies and potentially other cancer immunotherapies for patients in need.

Xin Zhou, PhD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

“Extracellular reprogramming of kinase signaling pathways”

Kinase pathways control how cells grow, divide, and survive. When they malfunction, they drive

many forms of cancer. Abnormal kinase signaling also contributes to resistance against current therapies. Rather than blocking these pathways as traditional treatments do, Dr. Zhou's research explores ways to change the outcome of aberrant kinase signaling. By redirecting these pathways toward anti-tumor responses, this approach has the potential to provide more durable treatments for cancers that evade existing therapies.

2025 Stage 2 Damon Runyon-Rachleff Innovators

Daniel J. Puleston, PhD, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

"Ex situ maintenance of intact human organs to study tumor biology"

The exploration of human tumors in their native environment is challenging, precluding a deeper understanding of how cancer and important therapeutics work. Dr. Puleston [Bakewell Foundation Innovator] is developing new ways to investigate human cancer by keeping tumor-bearing organs alive outside of the body, allowing for the experimental study of tumors within human tissues. Employing this approach to study hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), one of the most lethal forms of liver cancer, Dr. Puleston will expose HCC-laden livers to immunotherapy drugs and metabolic tracers to reveal the metabolic landscape of HCC cancers and how tumor metabolism is shaped following drug treatment. Through the study of tumors and anti-cancer agents in situ, Dr. Puleston hopes to elucidate new pathways with therapeutic potential and novel strategies to optimize existing therapeutics.

Humsa S. Venkatesh, PhD, Brigham and Women's Hospital

"Identifying and disrupting the bioelectric circuits driving brain cancer"

Brain cancers are one of the most common causes of cancer-related death and represent 120 molecularly distinct diseases. Despite advances in clarifying the genetic landscape of these cancers, they remain clinically intractable, underscoring the need to elucidate the complex factors contributing to their heterogeneity. As neuronal activity is known to govern the development of neural circuits and neuroplasticity, it is critical to consider these neural networks in the context of disease. Dr. Venkatesh will use classical and systems neuroscience approaches to determine how the nervous system contributes to brain cancer progression. A comprehensive understanding of malignant neural network interactions may lead to novel therapeutic interventions aimed at normalizing the tumor microenvironment.

Ziyang Zhang, PhD, University of California, Berkeley

"Chemical stimulation of GTP hydrolysis for oncogenic Ras mutants and beyond"

Dr. Zhang is developing a new form of cancer immunotherapy with improved safety and controllability. Redirecting the immune system to launch attacks on tumor cells has emerged as an extremely promising approach to fight cancer. One such strategy, named bispecific T cell engager antibody (BiTE) has shown remarkable efficacy against blood cancers, but it is also associated with severe toxicity. Using tools of synthetic organic chemistry, he aims to build a "chemical switch" that can be used to rapidly tune the activity of BiTE, thus allowing the circumvention of toxic side

effects without diminishing therapeutic potential. The ultimate goal of this project is to develop a cancer immunotherapy that can be safely employed at doses effective for the treatment of solid tumors.

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/meet-eight-early-career-cancer-researchers-awarded-32m>