MRA Announces $11 Million for 26 Grant Awards to Advance Melanoma Research

The 26 awards will support research at 23 institutions in five countries.

May 15, 2020 By Melanoma Research Alliance

By Cody R. Barnett, MRA Director of Communications

With the world's attention focused on the response to COVID-19, the Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA) knows that long after this pandemic has ended, melanoma research will still be urgently needed. To this end, and in recognition of Melanoma Awareness Month, the Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA), the largest non-profit funder of melanoma research, is proud to announce funding for 26 research awards totaling $10.9 million.

"As many people begin to focus on how to safely reopen our communities, MRA is committed to a continued and robust pipeline of research that can eliminate pain and suffering due to melanoma," says Debra Black, MRA co-founder and board chair. "We are delighted to invest in critical melanoma research during these difficult times."

In addition to providing an influx of funding as researchers return to their labs, MRA research awards support innovative ideas having the potential to rapidly improve outcomes for patients with melanoma. Project goals are expansive, and include research aimed at validating the use of artificial intelligence to improve early melanoma diagnosis, exploring CAR-T Cell therapy as a future melanoma treatment option, and evaluating how best to combine surgery, radiotherapy, and systemic treatments to treat metastatic disease, including neoadjuvant approaches.

"This year, for the first time ever, we estimate that more than 100,000 people in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive melanoma," says MRA Chief Science Officer Marc Hurlbert, PhD. "While our efforts over the last decade have reduced melanoma mortality rates – we still must continue to advance research needed to improve outcomes for all patients facing melanoma."

The 26 awards will support research at 23 institutions in five countries. The grants were vetted by MRA's Grant Review Committee through a rigorous peer review process and confirmed by the MRA Board of Directors. Including the current awards, MRA has now invested over $122.5 million directly into research.

“Over the last decade, the impact of research has been transformational to patients facing melanoma. We have no doubt that these new awards will continue that momentum and bring us closer to achieving our mission of ending suffering and death due to melanoma,” said MRA President & CEO Michael Kaplan.

MRA’s grant awards are made possible through the significant contributions of individuals, families, institutions and corporate allies. Donors and partners providing financial support for 75% or more of an award are listed below within the named award.

Read the press statement here.

2020 Grant Awards

Team Science Awards

Genomic instability in acral melanoma as a therapeutic vulnerability
The Black Family-MRA Team Science Award in Acral Melanoma
Boris Bastian, MD, PhD, The University of California, San Francisco

Overcoming upfront resistance to neoadjuvant CTLA-4 plus PD-1 blockade
MRA Team Science Award with Young Investigator supported by Amanda and Jonathan Eilian
Christian Blank, MD, PhD,Netherlands Cancer Institute

Evolution of metabolic and immune dysfunction in in-transit melanoma
The Black Family-MRA Team Science Award in In-Transit Melanoma
Greg Delgoffe, PhD, University of Pittsburgh

Germline biomarkers of melanoma immunotherapy: an international consortium
Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma-MRA Team Science Award
Tomas Kirchhoff, PhD, New York University

AI-Augmented Melanoma Triage and Diagnosis: A Prospective Multi-Site Study
L’Oréal Dermatological Beauty Brands-MRA Team Science Award
Roberto Novoa, MD, Stanford University

IL13Ra2 Chimeric Antigen Receptor (CAR) T cells for Metastatic Melanoma
The Black Family-MRA Team Science Award, with YIA generously supported by the Sokoloff Family
Antoni Ribas, MD, PhD, The University of California, Los Angeles

Effective therapies for patients with high risk in-transit disease
MRA Team Science Award, with generous support from the Helman Family
Richard Scolyer, MD, Melanoma Institute Australia

Next-generation computational biomarker development for PD-(L)1 efficacy
BJ’s Wholesale Club-MRA Team Science Award

Janis Taube, MD, Johns Hopkins University

Investigating melanoma metastases
MRA Team Science Award, Generously Supported by Rosetrees Trust
Samra Turajlic, PhD, The Francis Crick Institute

The effects of age on tumor dormancy
MRA Team Science Award, collaboratively funded by Johns Hopkins University and Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Ashani Weeraratna, PhD, Johns Hopkins University

Targeting persister cell states that drive drug resistance and metastasis
Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Foundation – MRA Team Science Award
Richard White, MD, PhD, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Young Investigator Awards

Loss of CD226 in T cells drives resistance to melanoma immunotherapy
Bristol-Myers Squibb – MRA Young Investigator Award
Tobias Bald, PhD, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute

Identification of Druggable Transcriptional Drivers in Melanoma
MRA Young Investigator Award, collaboratively funded by Massachusetts General Hospital
Liron Bar-Peled, PhD, Massachusetts General Hospital

Understanding Immunotherapy-Tolerant Melanoma Persister Cells
Bristol-Myers Squibb – MRA Young Investigator Award
Matthew Hangauer, PhD, University of California, San Diego

Activating dsRNA sensing in melanoma to overcome immunotherapy resistance
Bristol-Myers Squibb – MRA Young Investigator Award
Jeffrey Ishizuka, MD, PhD, Yale University

Targeting interactions between melanoma metabolism and radiation therapy
MRA Young Investigator Award, collaboratively funded by Emory University
Aparna Kesarwala, MD, PhD, Emory University

Examining the role of blebs in melanoma metastasis
MRA Young Investigator Award in memory of Leon Sapsuzian, Jr.
Jeremy Logue, PhD, Albany Medical College

Microenvironmental Regulators of Melanoma Brain Metastases
MRA Young Investigator Award
Berta Lopez Sanchez-Laorden, PhD, Universidad Miguel Hernandez de Elche

Targeting 1-Carbon Metabolism in Melanoma Brain Metastases

Tara Miller Melanoma Foundation – MRA Young Investigator Award
Michael Pacold, MD, PhD, New York University

Ablative radiotherapy as consolidation for oligoprogressive melanoma
ASTRO-MRA Young Investigator Award in Radiation Oncology
Reid Thompson, MD, PhD, Oregon Health & Science University

The impact of tumor progression trajectory on immunotherapy treatment
Michael and Jacqueline Ferro Family Foundation - MRA Young Investigator Award
Lixing Yang, PhD, The University of Chicago

Pilot Awards

Sensitizing melanoma to immunotherapy with novel DNA hypermethylating drugs
MRA Pilot Award
Alfonso Bellacosa, MD, PhD, The Research Institute of Fox Chase Cancer Center

Histone variant regulation of the melanoma immune microenvironment
Hess Foundation – MRA Pilot Award
Emily Bernstein, PhD, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Targeting immune inhibitory gene transcription to reverse T cell exhaustion
MRA Pilot Award
Linda Bradley, PhD, Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute

Tandem cytokine delivery with non-replicating herpes viral vectors
MRA Pilot Award
Stephanie Dougan, PhD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Uncovering Nodes of Convergence of Targeted and Immune Therapy in Melanoma
Hess Foundation – MRA Pilot Award
Poulikos Poulikakos, PhD, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

---