Yapeng Su, PhD, Receives 2024 Damon Runyon-Jake Wetchler Award

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Each year, the Damon Runyon-Jake Wetchler Award for Pediatric Innovation is given to a third-year Damon Runyon Fellow whose research has the greatest potential to impact the prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of pediatric cancer. This year, the award recognizes the work of Yapeng Su, PhD, a Damon Runyon Quantitative Biology Fellow at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle.

Dr. Su is working to increase the effectiveness and affordability of adoptive T cell therapy (ACT), which transforms a patient's own immune T cells into a "living drug" capable of recognizing and destroying their cancer cells. This innovative therapy has provided cures for many pediatric patients with previously untreatable cancers, including the first child with leukemia to receive the treatment twelve years ago.

The Jake Wetchler Foundation was established in honor of Jake, who survived Hodgkin's lymphoma at age 18, but then lost his life to leukemia at age 20. Jake's philosophical bent and determination live on in the impact of the award that carries his name. "Jake would often say to us, 'Don't let the cancer win,'" says Jean Singer, Jake's mother and the Founder of the Foundation. "Pediatric research in particular is consistently shortchanged in research funding. We live in an age of unprecedented technology and scientific promise—now is the time to harness these advances in the fight against pediatric cancer."

"We have so many technologies now—between CRISPR, protein engineering, synthetic biology, and data science—to give patients' T cells different superpowers," Dr. Su said. "We're hopeful those superpowers will be enough to dissolve the hardest-to-treat tumors."

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