

PRESS RELEASE

Award from the Klüh Foundation 2019 for Prof. Dr. med. James Nagarajah, University Hospitals Essen and Nijmegen

Klüh Foundation honours scientist for pioneering research into thyroid cancer

Düsseldorf, 09 May 2019 - The award of the Klüh Foundation for the Promotion of Innovation in Science and Research, which includes prize money of EUR 25,000, this year goes to the scientist Prof. Dr. med. James Nagarajah (43) who teaches at the university hospital of Essen and the university hospital Radboud in Nijmegen. The researcher has opened a new chapter in the treatment of what is known as RAIR thyroid cancer. He has marked a pathway to the successful treatment of this often terminal cancer. The laudator at the award ceremony in Düsseldorf was Prof. Dr. med. Frank Ulrich Montgomery, President of the German Medical Association.

The exceptional scientist, who originally came from Sri Lanka, was able to convincingly demonstrate the successful treatment of RAIR carcinomas in preclinical experiments. The thyroid carcinoma is treated with radioiodine. Thanks to their iodine labelling, metastases can be detected, irradiated and treated with the aid of nuclear medicine. However, about 25% of metastases lose their ability to absorb iodine and thus elude radioiodine therapy. These metastases are designated as radioiodine refractory (RAIR).

Manipulation with substances

The key to Prof. Nagarajah's remarkable research success was being able to identify the driving mechanisms of the iodine negativity and find ways to manipulate these mechanisms. The manipulation was carried out with substances that intervene at certain points in the signalling pathways and thus block these paths. The scientist was thus able to demonstrate the achievement of a re-differentiation of the thyroid carcinomas, with the effect that these tumours can then successfully be treated with radioiodine therapy.

The renowned nuclear medicine specialist Prof. Dr. Dr. Andreas Bockisch, who headed the Clinic for Nuclear Medicine at Essen University Hospital for 20 years said: "This therapeutic approach is a milestone in the treatment of these patients."

Following the success of the first clinical data, Prof. Nagarajah is now heading a prospective clinical study at the Duisburg-Essen University Hospital, which is the world's first investigation into this treatment concept for RAIR thyroid carcinomas. This study is being conducted in close collaboration with the prestigious Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York and has already recruited its first patients. Since thyroid carcinomas are among the fastest growing tumours (USA: 40,000 new cases), the scientist's research findings are highly relevant.

“Pronounced scientific curiosity”

Prof. Bockisch, who was conferred emeritus status in 2016, said of his colleague, who arrived in Germany as a ten-year-old and is now a German citizen: “Prof. Dr. med. James Nagarajah stands out from other young scientists due to his pronounced scientific curiosity and great capacity for enthusiasm. At the same time, he demonstrates a very high level of interpersonal skills and sense of social responsibility.”

Born in Sri Lanka, he graduated from his German grammar school as the best student of the year and was already admitted to the German National Academic Foundation during his studies in Gießen. In June 2010, at the age of 34, PD Dr. Nagarajah earned his doctorate with magna cum laude from the Faculty of Medicine in Essen and only two years later, in July 2012, qualified there as a professor. The scientist has drawn attention with a wealth of highly acclaimed publications. In July 2013, Dr. Nagarajah received a scholarship from the German Research Foundation (DFG) and was appointed as a “Visiting Investigator” at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) in New York, USA, for two years, and promoted to “Visiting Professor” one year later.

Prof. Coordt von Mannstein, Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Klüh Foundation: “I thank the founder of the Foundation Josef Klüh and the Advisory Board, in particular Prof. Dr. Alfons Labisch, for the opportunity to again support an outstanding scientist in a promising way. I am convinced that with his enthusiasm for science and his high level of expertise, Prof. Nagarajah will go on to achieve a great deal more for the good of humanity.”

About the Klüh Foundation:

The Foundation for the Promotion of Innovation in Science and Research, founded in 1987 by the company's owner Josef Klüh to mark the 75th anniversary of the Düsseldorf-based family business Klüh Service Management has, since then, awarded foundation prizes totalling 780,000 Euros. In recent years, the foundation has supported a wide range of medical research.

About Klüh:

Klüh Service Management GmbH is a global multi-service provider. Founded in 1911, the company has decades of experience in the area of infrastructural services. The departments Cleaning, Catering, Clinic Service, Security, Personnel Service, Airport and Facility Service offer both individual services as well as integrated service concepts. With nearly 50,000 employees in eight nations, the company achieves sales of around 806 million Euros (2018).

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