

HK EYE

“THE PATIENTS ARE THE HEROES”

DR. PAUL NEGULESCU

Shaw Laureate & Scientist

American scientist Paul A. Negulescu could not believe it as he stepped on stage in suit and tie, receiving the medal which honoured his medical breakthrough on Cystic Fibrosis, a gene disorder which was proven life threatening to many.

In 2022, Paul won the Shaw Prize in Life Science and Medicine with Michael J. Welsh, an American pulmonologist. For the last 20 years, they searched for suitable Cystic Fibrosis treatments. From making over 10,000 molecules, they discovered four which became drugs and one which could treat up to 90% of the patients.

"I'm surprised at the general awareness that Cystic Fibrosis is a terrible disease," he says. "It was a medical problem with a high unmet need. And many people thought it really couldn't be treated at the level of the underlying genetic defect."

But his love for science and his motivation to treat his patients led to medicine discoveries. In one of his first meetings with a Cystic Fibrosis patient, Paul says, "His message to me was, 'Don't just treat my lung, treat my whole body.' And that was so impactful to us because we decided based on conversations like that to make a pill, not an inhaled therapy."

The patients were the inspirations, they were also the important "why" to his research. "The patients are the heroes, because if they hadn't come forward, if they hadn't organised themselves to be ready when we had some science to offer, none of this would have happened," he adds.

Ever since Paul attended a physiology class at UC Berkeley, he has been intrigued with how science came to be. "I started asking questions, and once you start asking questions, you start learning at an accelerated rate," he says.

The way that a kidney purifies blood even fascinated him. "It uses basic principles of physics that is the same principle that's applied to how air conditioners work," he says. "It takes one type of matter, moves it to one side."

This curiosity continued during his Cystic Fibrosis research. While he was trying to understand his patients, there were heartfelt moments. "To hear a little boy, tell you an adult that, 'Thank you', first of all and tell you what your work means to him," he says. "All of us in that room said to each other, 'We're going to help this family.' So it became a personal commitment at that moment. It switched from a scientific problem to a people problem to solve."

Paul hoped everyone can learn from this story of basic science to medicine. "The basic scientists understand the disease and the cause of the disease. Scientists like myself can try to take those learnings and develop medicines," he says. "The patients and the physicians have to be part of it, too. And when we all work together great things can happen."

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