

MEDIA RELEASE

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Prestigious international award for UTAS School of Medicine scientist

A UTAS researcher has been chosen as the 2013 Young Scientist of the Year by the European Respiratory Society (ERS).

Dr Romy Singh Sohal, a senior post-doctoral research fellow in the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence for Chronic Respiratory Disease and Lung Aging, within the School of Medicine at UTAS, will receive his award in front of 18,000 delegates at the ERS annual conference in Barcelona, Spain, in September.

Dr Sohal said the award was a surprise but an honour.

“I’m very pleased to have been recognised for my research in this way- it is an area I feel strongly about and it is my hope that this work will have a positive impact on public health.”

Dr Sohal’s award recognises his work over the past seven years on a process called Epithelial-Mesenchymal Transition (EMT) in the airways.

“This instability of the airway lining is caused especially by smoking and may be the reason for the scarring and narrowing of the airways.

“The disease, referred to as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (destructive airway narrowing with limitation to breathing) occurs in 10 per cent of the Tasmanian population and in 30 per cent of smokers,” Dr Sohal said.

“Importantly, EMT may also be the link between this damage and lung cancer formation, which occurs mainly in the airways of these individuals with destructive bronchitis.”

Originally from the Punjab in Northern India, Dr Sohal and his wife Pradeep migrated to Australia, where Dr Sohal began his PhD at UTAS in 2006, graduating in 2010.

Dr Sohal had previously completed a Master’s degree in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology in his home town of Amritsar and then a second Masters in Biochemical Pharmacology supervised by Professor Stephen Holgate at the University of Southampton, UK.

The couple became Australian citizens in 2011, and have very recently welcomed a new baby, Mehtab. Pradeep recently qualified in tax-accountancy in Australia, and has a previous degree in Accounting from India.

The translational research work has been supervised by School of Medicine Fellow Professor Haydn Walters, a respiratory clinician, physician at Royal Hobart Hospital, and Director of the Centre of Research and Excellence, and Emeritus Professor Kon Muller, an internationally eminent pathologist.

Prof Walters said this novel work is changing in a fundamental way how we understand the effects of smoking on airway tissue and its complications.

“I am so appreciative that the research work which we feel is really important for the respiratory health of the community has now been recognised internationally,” he said.

“We have made good use of the excellent facilities that are now available in Hobart to do world-class research.”

The ERS is the leading lung professionals’ organisation in Europe covering both basic science and clinical respiratory medicine. The mission of the ERS is to alleviate suffering from respiratory disease and promote lung health through research, sharing of knowledge and through medical and public education. The society has 10,000 members in over 100 countries.

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