

NEWS

Community Newsletter: Kavli Prize puts spotlight on autism science, plus a genetics PSA

BY SPECTRUM

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Autism-related science spent some time in the spotlight this week when the **Kavli Prize in Neuroscience** went to geneticists **Jean-Louis Mandel**, **Harry Orr**, **Christopher Walsh** and **Huda Zoghbi**, for “pioneering the discovery of genes underlying a range of serious brain disorders.”

Zoghbi, whom *Spectrum* profiled a year ago, is known for — among other accomplishments — her discovery of the **gene responsible for Rett syndrome**, which is often accompanied by autism. Walsh, whom we profiled in 2008, has discovered multiple genes **involved in neurodevelopmental conditions**, including autism.

JUST ANNOUNCED **#KavliPrize2022 #Neuroscience** honors Jean-Louis Mandel, Harry Orr, Christopher Walsh and Huda Zoghbi for pioneering the discovery of genes underlying a range of serious brain disorders and elucidating the pathways by which these genes work. <https://t.co/NnsEF3xxRC> pic.twitter.com/Z7OrFcfDfh

— The Kavli Prize (@KavliPrize) **June 1, 2022**

Congratulations poured in for all four recipients. “**This is fantastic**,” tweeted Hunt Willard, chief scientific officer at **Genome Medical** in San Francisco, California, summing up the sentiments of many on social media.

This is fantastic <https://t.co/ihj3H6leUv>

— Hunt Willard (@hwillardX) **June 1, 2022**

Sylvain Lesné, associate professor of neuroscience at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, **included a photo** of himself with Zoghbi and Orr. Others, such as **Chao J. Liu**, research fellow at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, called out their good fortune to **have worked** with one of the winners.

Congratulations Huda and Harry!! ?????????????????? <https://t.co/xtmdjNHZC5pic.twitter.com/8oMslANW8R>

— Sylvain Lesne, Ph.D. (@Lsylvain) **June 1, 2022**

Big congrats to Harry, my thesis committee member! Really blessed to be able to work with a textbook name on ataxia! <https://t.co/n0J4Kd9Rx9>

— Chao J. Liu, PhD (@cjliu10) **June 1, 2022**

Kavli kudos also came from neurogeneticist **Kevin Mitchell**, of **Wiring the Brain** fame, who tweeted his own helpful **public service announcement** on the field of genetics. It is “not about genes causing traits,” he began, but rather “about how **variation** in genes causes **variation** in traits.”

PSA: genetics as a science is not about genes causing traits. It's about how **variation** in genes causes **variation** in traits.

— Kevin Mitchell (@WiringTheBrain) **May 31, 2022**

Mitchell, associate professor of genetics and neuroscience at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, carried on with seven threaded tweets to explain that although the field's **methods may be reductive** — say, knocking out a single gene to see the effects on brain development — that need **not lead to reductive theories**.

Robert W. Williams, department chair of genetics, genomics and informatics at the University of Tennessee in Memphis, described the addition of the word 'variation' as "**perfect**." He added that it's an edit he, as a co-author, is compelled to make on many genetics papers and grant applications each year.

Ah, perfect Kevin. As a coauthor on many genetics papers and grant apps I am compelled to make this vital edit many time per year. Some might call it pedantic but to me it is fundamental! **@DavidAshbrook @haomself @ewanbirney @IBANGStweets**
<https://t.co/rogTk7VUYE>

— Robert W. Williams (@robwilliamsiii) **May 31, 2022**

"Well said," tweeted **Josh Dubnau**, professor of neurobiology and behavior at Stony Brook University in New York, in response, while noting that it is still useful to derive "incomplete/typically false models of biology from reductionist experiments."

well said. And yet, forging incomplete/typically false models of biology from reductionist experiments is an entirely useful strategy. Each model, utilizing Occam's razor, is the "straw person" that gets destroyed by the next experiment. This we zig zag towards truth.

— Josh dubnau (@joshdubnau) **May 31, 2022**

"Each model, utilizing Occam's razor, is the "straw person" that gets destroyed by the next experiment," Dubnau wrote. "This we zig zag towards truth."

That's it for this week's Community Newsletter as we zig zag toward a new week of tweets. If you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere, feel free to send an email to **news@spectrumnews.org**.

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