

Professor James Allison
2018 King Faisal Prize Laureate
Medicine
Acceptance Speech

I am so glad to be here and honored to be selected for the King Faisal Prize.

As a basic scientist, I have been blessed to see my research findings translate into a powerful new strategy for cancer therapy. In 2006 I met a melanoma patient named Sharon, a newlywed and recent college graduate. A year earlier, her doctors told her that she had only a few months to live. She had received multiple prior therapies, but her cancer continued to grow.

As a last resort, she joined a clinical trial of a then experimental drug based on my immunology work called anti-CTLA-4 therapy. Within 3 months, her tumors shrank and then disappeared. A year later she hugged me and cried after being told by her doctor that she showed no evidence of recurrent cancer. I cried with her.

Sharon and I have become good friends. When her first child was born a few years later, she sent me pictures. Then, pictures of her second child. She is now 11 years out from her battle with cancer and enjoying life with a vibrant family. I've since had the privilege of meeting many patients who had benefitted from anti-CTLA-4 therapy. It's always overwhelming and my emotions often get the best of me as they tell their stories.

Additional CTLA-4-like brakes have been identified. Because drugs against these brakes, now known as checkpoint blockade therapy, treat the immune system, not the cancer, they are effective against many kinds of cancer. Checkpoint blockade agents are now approved for melanoma, kidney cancer, bladder cancer, Hodgkin's lymphoma, lung cancer, and others.

Of course, we still have a lot of work to do. We have not been able to successfully treat cancers such as pancreatic cancers and glioblastoma. We're continuing our efforts and hope to make progress in the near future.

I am truly honored to have been selected for this prize. I owe this success to a large number of students and fellows who worked in my lab and I owe special thanks to my wonderful partner in science, and life, my wife Pam Sharma.