

Press release

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Science prizes Marcel Benoist and Latsis go to a pioneer in online psychotherapy and a cancer researcher

Bern, 13 September 2021 – Professor Thomas Berger (University of Bern) will receive this year's Swiss Science Prize Marcel Benoist for his innovative contribution to Internet-based psychotherapy. This year's Swiss Science Prize Latsis, which is awarded to young researchers under the age of 40, goes to Professor Nicola Aceto (ETH Zurich) for his ground-breaking discoveries in the area of cancer research.

The Swiss Science Prize Marcel Benoist is considered by researchers to be the Swiss equivalent of the Nobel Prize and laureates are awarded CHF 250,000 for their achievements. This year's prize goes to Thomas Berger, Professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy at the University of Bern. Berger is a pioneer in the design, testing and rollout of digital therapeutic interventions (via apps and websites) to prevent and treat mental health issues and disorders. As a leading international expert in the area of psychotherapy research, he has explored and empirically confirmed the effectiveness of online treatment methods compared to purely conventional forms of psychotherapy.

'I am incredibly honoured to receive the Swiss Science Prize Marcel Benoist. This is a tremendous endorsement of the work and research undertaken with the support of my amazing research team and collaborative partners. At the same time, it is acknowledgement of our joint efforts to make effective psychological interventions accessible to a large number of people,' states Berger enthusiastically.

Among other things, the web-based self-help programmes developed by Berger can be used to treat depression and anxiety, the two most common mental disorders in Switzerland. Other online tools offer help with sleep disorders or with psychological distress after illnesses and separations. Berger has also successfully developed 'blended treatments', which combine online treatments with live therapy sessions.

Readily available digital services can greatly improve access to treatment for certain groups of patients, such as those who are absolutely unable or unwilling to see a therapist. Since the start of government measures to tackle the coronavirus situation, however, Internet-based forms of therapy have also become crucial for society as a whole. And demand is on the rise. Thomas Berger and his team are currently working on projects to further improve the effectiveness of self-help and blended approaches to treat depression and anxiety disorders. They are also working with cooperation partners to develop an app for suicide prevention as well as online interventions for vulnerable groups in society, such as refugees, who are particularly difficult to reach through conventional services.

Paving the way for new cancer treatments

As the winner of this year's Swiss Science Prize Latsis, Italian national and associate professor at ETH Zürich Nicola Aceto will receive CHF 100,000 for his ground-breaking discoveries in the area of cancer research.

Metastasis, or the spread of cancer cells from the original locus of a tumour to other parts of the body, is often life-threatening, accounting for over 90 per cent of all cancer-related deaths worldwide. Metastasis occurs as a result of circulating tumour cells (CTC), which leave the original tumour and travel via the bloodstream to other organs, where they form secondary malignant growths.

Aceto made several important discoveries while researching these circulating tumour cells: He noticed that clusters of CTCs form metastases particularly frequently; such clusters are particularly prevalent in prostate or breast cancer, for example. He deduced from this that the spread of cancer in the body can be reduced if it is possible break down CTC clusters with drugs. Aceto has also managed to isolate viable CTCs from practically all types of cancer.

These and other findings have already been applied in clinical trials in patients with metastatic cancer and have contributed to the development of diagnostic and prognostic tools. However, Aceto and his team continue to set ambitious goals for themselves: "the Latsis Prize is a great honour for my research group and myself. Particularly, it is also a great motivation to continue our research efforts in the same very ambitious direction, aiming at developing new therapeutic concepts for targeting and suppressing metastasis in patients."

Joint award ceremony in Bern

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) was responsible for selecting the laureates on behalf of the two foundations. The joint award ceremony for both the Swiss Science Prize Marcel Benoist and the Swiss Science Prize Latsis will take place at Bern City Hall on 4 November. The President of the Marcel Benoist Foundation, Guy Parmelin, will present the awards. He had this to say about the event: "I am extremely pleased that we can present the 2021 Swiss science prizes to two outstanding researchers. Thomas Berger and Nicola Aceto are both making great contributions to our society through their work. They are prime examples of Swiss research excellence.

Swiss Science Prize Marcel Benoist

2021 Laureate: Prof. Thomas Berger

Thomas Berger (1971) grew up in Konolfingen and studied psychology at the University of Bern. He earned his PhD at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau and also worked as a psychotherapist, including at the Kilchberg Psychiatric Clinic. After working as a senior research assistant at both the University of Geneva and the University of Bern, he was selected for an SNSF scholarship to conduct research at Linköping University in Sweden. He then returned to the University of Bern to complete his PhD under an SNSF Ambizione grant. In 2013, he was hired by the University of Bern to teach and conduct research as part of an SNSF-funded professorship. In 2018, he was given full tenure at the University of Bern's Institute of Psychology and appointed as head of the Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy. Thomas Berger has been involved in two major European research programmes and has received several awards for his research, including the Outstanding Early Career Achievement Award from the Society for Psychotherapy Research.

About the Marcel Benoist Foundation

Each year since 1920, the Marcel Benoist Foundation has awarded prizes for outstanding research that has an impact on human life. These prizes are awarded independently without regard to any specific university. In doing so, the foundation pays tribute to researchers who exemplify the level of excellence of research conducted in Switzerland. Eleven laureates have already gone on to receive the Nobel Prize. The nomination and selection process is handled by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) on behalf of the Marcel Benoist Foundation. The 2021 prize will be awarded in the field of humanities and social sciences.

More information can be found at: www.marcel-benoist.ch

Swiss Science Prize Latsis

2021 Laureate: Prof. Nicola Aceto

Nicola Aceto (1982) was born in Italy and studied medical and pharmaceutical biotechnology at the University of Eastern Piedmont in Novara. He obtained his PhD from the Friedrich Miescher Institute for Biomedical Research in Basel and then worked as a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard Medical School in Boston. On returning to Switzerland he led a research team and held an SNSF-sponsored assistant professorship in oncology at the University of Basel. In 2021 he moved to ETH Zurich where he has since led a research team and worked as Associate Professor of Molecular Oncology. Nicola Aceto has already received three ERC grants and earned numerous prizes in his career to date, including the Friedrich Miescher Award for Outstanding Achievements in Biochemistry.

About the Latsis Foundation

Each year since 1983, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) has awarded the Swiss Science Prize Latsis (formerly known as the National Latsis Prize) on behalf of the Latsis Foundation, which was founded in 1975. The prize honours young researchers up to the age of 40 at Swiss universities for their outstanding contributions. Laureates are chosen through a selection procedure run by the SNSF. The 2021 prize will be awarded in the fields of biology and medicine.

More information can be found at: www.fondationlatsis.org