

## The Gagna & Van Heck International Prize goes to a Belgian research couple for their work on **incurable diseases**

The Gagna & Van Heck International Prize for Incurable Diseases, a worldwide award presented every three years by the FNRS, was presented for the first time to a Belgian team. Laurence Boon (Cliniques universitaires Saint-Luc de Bruxelles, UCLouvain) and Miikka Vikkula (Institut de Duve, UCLouvain) were awarded for their contributions to the complex spectrum of orphan vascular diseases. Through their research works, they have elucidated numerous aspects of this disease spectrum, ultimately leading to significant therapeutic advancements and practical solutions.

They have been united for 30 years in work and in life, represent an example of biomedical vocation and work tirelessly to improve the daily lives of patients suffering from poorly understood diseases: **Miikka Vikkula** is Professor of Genetics at the UCLouvain Institut de Duve and Investigator of the WEL Research Institute ; **Laurence Boon** is Professor, Clinical Physician and Coordinator of the Vascular Malformations Center at Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc in Brussels (UCLouvain).



(c) Danny Ghys

Together, they have been rewarded for their contribution to a **better understanding of orphan vascular diseases**, and for the significant therapeutic advances they have made.

The **Gagna & Van Heck International Prize for Incurable Diseases** was presented to them on September 23 by Véronique Halloin, Secretary General of the FNRS.

Vascular malformations or anomalies are rare diseases. However, there are around forty of them, which means that **3 out of every 1.000 people** suffer from them. 80% of which are genetic in origin, these clusters of malformed vessels lead to abnormal blood circulation in the regions concerned. These pathologies can affect any tissue or organ, causing chronic pain and bleeding. They are highly disabling, terribly painful and sometimes fatal diseases, affecting adults and children alike.

Thanks to their **complementary research teams**, Miikka Vikkula and Laurence Boon have understood the origin and mechanism of the vast majority of these vascular anomalies, improving their **diagnosis** and paving the way for new therapeutic avenues worldwide.

In particular, they discovered that these malformations could be treated with a drug (Sirolimus) and even succeeded in treating a malformation in utero by administering the treatment to the mother during her pregnancy: a world first. Following a clinical trial with another drug, they were also able to save the hand of a 19-year-old girl who was scheduled for amputation.

“We’re very proud to have our work recognized in this way. This Prize shows that medical advances are the result of long-term research,” said **Miikka Vikkula**. “This award highlights our work as a team, combining clinical excellence and fundamental research, which is essential to improving the quality of life of our patients,” insisted **Laurence Boon**.

Hundreds of patients have already benefited from these rapidly expanding clinical advances.

The **Gagna A. & Ch. Van Heck International Prize for incurable diseases** is a €75,000 prize awarded every three years by the FNRS and made possible by a **private bequest**. It is intended to reward a researcher or doctor whose work has contributed to the cure of a disease that is as yet incurable, or whose research has led to the hope of a cure in the near future. This is a prestigious prize with a **worldwide reach**: previous winners have come from the USA, France, Great Britain and Germany.

The **FNRS** (Fund for Scientific Research) is a private foundation of public utility created in 1928. It supports and finances fundamental research carried out in the universities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in all scientific fields. The FNRS promotes scientific excellence and its mission is to guarantee freedom of research. Over 90% of its resources are public, coming from the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (70%), the Federal State (15%), the Walloon Region (5%) and the National Lottery (3%). The remainder comes from donations, bequests and patrons, and is used to supplement public funding by rewarding researchers or financing other types of project.

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