UT Southwestern Medical Center

Masashi Yanagisawa, M.D., Ph.D., to receive 2026 Lasker Award for breakthrough in sleep science

Sept. 9, 2026

To the UT Southwestern Community:

We are pleased to share the news that our colleague **Masashi Yanagisawa, M.D., Ph.D.**, has been named a recipient of the 2026 Albert Lasker Basic Medical Research Award for his discovery of orexin, a brain peptide that maintains wakefulness, and demonstration that the absence of its action is responsible for narcolepsy, a profound disorder of sleep.

Dr. Yanagisawa was a full-time member of the UT Southwestern faculty for more than 20 years, during which time he conducted the prize-winning research. He is now a part-time Professor of Molecular Genetics at UTSW as well as Director of the International Institute for Integrative Sleep Medicine at the University of Tsukuba in Japan, a primary appointment he has held since 2014.

This is the third consecutive year and sixth time overall that a UT Southwestern scientist has received a Lasker Award, often called “America’s Nobel.” Dr. Yanagisawa joins Steven McKnight, Ph.D. (2025), Professor of Biochemistry; Zhijian “James” Chen, Ph.D. (2024), Professor of Molecular Biology and Director of the Center for Inflammation Research; and Nobel Laureates Alfred Gilman, M.D., Ph.D. (1989), Michael Brown, M.D. (1985), and Joseph Goldstein, M.D. (1985), as UT Southwestern’s Lasker Award recipients.

In 1998, Dr. Yanagisawa discovered orexin while investigating molecules that activate previously unexplained receptors in the brain. Subsequent studies revealed that the absence of orexin caused sudden collapses in mice resembling human narcolepsy, providing a fundamental new understanding of how the brain regulates sleep and wakefulness. His work established a new field of sleep research and is an exceptional example of curiosity-driven basic science, illuminating mechanisms of disease leading to new approaches that improve human health.

Dr. Yanagisawa is sharing the award with Emmanuel Mignot, M.D., Ph.D., the Craig Reynolds Professor of Sleep Medicine at Stanford University. At the same time Dr. Yanagisawa was defining the functional effects of orexin, Dr. Mignot was working to identify the defective gene responsible for an inherited form of narcolepsy in two breeds of dogs. He zeroed in on orexin receptor-2 – the same receptor gene Dr. Yanagisawa had uncovered. Their findings were published two weeks apart in 1999.

Born in Tokyo, Dr. Yanagisawa earned his M.D. at the University of Tsukuba in 1985 and a Ph.D. from the same institution three years later. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a former Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigator. He also was awarded the 2023 Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences.

Please join us in congratulating Dr. Yanagisawa on this well-deserved honor and in celebrating the extraordinary legacy of scientific achievement at our institution.

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