

Biomedical engineer earns Cyprus' top national prize

November 27, 2012

Distinguished Professor Kyriacos Athanasiou, who holds the Child Family Endowed Chair in Engineering at the University of California, Davis, today (Nov. 27) received the Nemitsas Prize from the president of the Republic of Cyprus.

The prize, the highest honor that a Cypriot scientist can receive, took place at the Presidential Palace in Nicosia.

"It is always wonderful for someone to receive recognition for his or her work in the form of awards, honors or prizes. The Nemitsas Prize is particularly important to me because it is the highest award from the land where I was born and reared. It is even more important to me because my entire family, including my mom, were in the audience when the president of Cyprus presented me with this great honor. It was with great humility and respect that I dedicated the Nemitsas Prize to my beloved mother and late father," Athanasiou said.

Founded in 2009, The Takis and Louki Nemitsas Foundation presents the annual award to a Cypriot who lives in Cyprus or abroad and whose discoveries, inventions or artistic accomplishments offer outstanding benefits to not only Cyprus but the world. Eligible categories include engineering, environmental sciences, seismology, health and medicine, and the arts. The first award was given in 2010. The Nemitsas Prize includes a solid gold medal and a cash award of 50,000 euros.

Athanasiou received the award in recognition of his numerous achievements in the field of biomedical engineering and tissue engineering. For example, a device he co-invented, the EZ-IO kit, was widely used in the cholera epidemic that swept Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. The kit is a drill used to insert intravenous lines directly into the bones of people whose veins are inaccessible due to severe dehydration or shock.

Athanasiou also invented and marketed a device that prevents diabetic ulcer-related amputations. In addition, he founded a company, Osteobiologics, to market an implant developed by his group for the treatment of cartilage damage, the first device of its kind to reach the market.

Athanasiou was born in Larnaka, Cyprus. Following mandatory military service, he came to the United States to study, attending Brescia College in Owensboro, Ky., and receiving his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from New York Institute of Technology at Old Westbury and his Ph.D. from Columbia University.

After serving as a professor of orthopaedics at the University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, and as a professor in the biomedical engineering program at the University of Texas at Austin, Athanasiou joined the bioengineering department at Rice University, where he was the Hasselmann Professor of Bioengineering until 2009. Since then, he has been distinguished professor and chair of the biomedical engineering department at UC Davis, where he holds a joint appointment as a distinguished professor of orthopaedic surgery.

Athanasiou is currently working on clinically acceptable solutions to treat cartilage injury and diseases. His laboratory strives to ensure that engineered and processed tissues have biomechanical function akin to native tissue. His group has successfully fabricated sections of articular cartilage by the self-assembly of cells, without the use of any scaffolds. Recently, his group has shown that the biomimetic cartilage it produces is biocompatible, stable and continues to mature once it has been implanted.

Athanasiou holds 28 patents and has published more than 250 papers in prestigious journals. He has received many awards and honors, including the Distinguished Service Award of the Biomedical Engineering Society, the Thomas A. Edison Patent Award, the Wall Street Journal's 2008 Innovation Award, the Hershel M. Rich Outstanding Invention Award (twice), and the Van C. Mow Medal. He is a fellow of the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and the Biomedical Engineering Society. He is editor-in-chief of the Annals of Biomedical Engineering, the flagship journal of the Biomedical Engineering Society.

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