Harold Varmus Awarded Henry G. Friesen International Prize in Health Research

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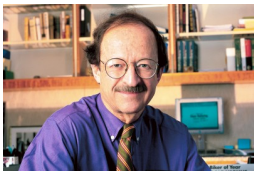
Summary

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center President Harold Varmus was awarded the 2008 Henry G. Friesen International Prize in Health Research on September 24 in Toronto.



Harold Varmus

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center President Harold Varmus was awarded the 2008 Henry G. Friesen International Prize in Health Research on September 24 in Toronto. Henry Friesen is a Canadian endocrinologist credited with the discovery of human prolactin. The prize, established in 2005, acknowledges Dr. Friesen's achievements in health research and health research policy. This year's award recognized Dr. Varmus' leadership and innovative contributions to medical research and his promotion of science over four decades.

As part of the Friesen Prize program, Dr. Varmus spoke at a public forum in Toronto. Addressing the prospects for improving global health through the promotion of scientific work worldwide, he observed that "health promotes economic success, political stability, and international security" and added that support of science, particularly health science, should become part of the foreign policy of nations with advanced economies.

Dr. Varmus described how early experiences as a medical student during a fourth-year elective spent at a mission hospital in Bareilly, India, where he saw "extraordinary cases of tuberculosis, leprosy, and other diseases … ignited a longstanding concern about the discrepancies between rich nations and poor."

His decades-long efforts to improve global health include chairing the scientific board of Grand Challenges in Global Health, an initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. And to ensure that new scientific knowledge is shared globally, Dr. Varmus co-founded the Public Library of Science, a publisher of open-

access journals in the biomedical sciences. “A traditional obstacle to the practice of science in poor countries is a lack of access to scientific information, materials, and literature,” he said. “[Our] intention is to provide the outcomes of research to the public that paid for it — including students, teachers, journalists, and advocates — and to a scientific community that can explore the literature more usefully. An important additional benefit is distribution to the entire world, including especially those doing science in developing countries.”

Dr. Varmus concluded his remarks by noting that in many areas of the world where science has often been neglected or has had an uneven record of accomplishment there has been incremental progress. He pointed to the proliferation of biotechnology and information technology firms in India, educational and scientific enterprises that are being developed collaboratively between US universities and some states in the Persian Gulf, and facilities and funds for basic science research that are growing in parts of Asia and in some African nations. “These are hopeful signs in a world beset with energy shortages, environmental degradation, climate change, persistent diseases, poor educational systems, and stubborn difficulties in supplying water and food to all its inhabitants,” Dr. Varmus observed. “There are no easy fixes to these dilemmas. But any solutions are going to require a much broader pursuit and application of science. All parts of the world will need to participate in the adventure of science. And in the process of globalizing science, the world could become a better place, partly because its scientists were working together.”