Morris receives top Alzheimer’s Association honor
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By Michael C. Purdy

Washington University neurologist John C. Morris, MD, received the Alzheimer’s Association’s Medical and Scientific Award for 2013.

Morris, the Harvey A. and Dorismae Hacker Friedman Distinguished Professor of Neurology and director of the Charles F. and Joanne Knight Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center (Knight ADRC), was recognized for his many contributions to Alzheimer’s research and treatment at the association’s annual Rita Hayworth Gala in Chicago May 11.

The gala is named in honor of actress Rita Hayworth, who died of Alzheimer’s disease. The actress’s daughter, Princess Yasmin Aga Khan, started the tradition of the galas in 1984, and they have raised more than $59 million for Alzheimer’s research.

“We’ve had a long and highly valued relationship with the Alzheimer’s Association,” Morris said. “Receiving this award was a moving and very meaningful honor for me and all of my colleagues at the Knight ADRC.”

Among other accomplishments, Morris’ research team refined the Clinical Dementia Rating (CDR) system, which was first developed by the founding director of the Alzheimer’s center, Leonard Berg, MD. The CDR now is the standard clinical measure for staging of dementia.

Morris’ studies have helped clinicians better distinguish between the normal effects of aging on memory and the earliest clinical symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. Over the course of his career, Morris has helped guide the formation of a new consensus that Alzheimer’s disease actively damages patients’ brains for a decade or more before mental functions become noticeably impaired. Morris, Joseph L. Price, PhD, DPhil, professor of anatomy and neurobiology, and others at the ADRC contributed significantly to this consensus through a series of studies that revealed widespread brain damage in patients only recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

This insight led scientists to conclude that treating Alzheimer’s disease prior to cognitive impairment might significantly improve the chances of slowing or stopping the breakdown of normal brain function. Morris and his colleagues at the Knight ADRC have been frontrunners in the development of biomarkers, or factors that can be tested to identify the presence of presymptomatic Alzheimer’s disease.

“I accept this award on behalf of the investigators, staff, and participants and their families of the Knight ADRC, who together are responsible for the accomplishments this award recognizes,” Morris said.

In 2008, the National Institute on Aging named Morris as principal investigator of the Dominantly Inherited Alzheimer’s Network (DIAN), an international collaboration of Alzheimer’s research centers. DIAN allowed researchers to validate Alzheimer’s biomarkers in patients with rare inherited forms of the disease.

Based on the groundwork laid by Morris, researchers now are testing preclinical treatment of inherited forms of Alzheimer’s disease in a second international research collaborative, the Dominantly Inherited Alzheimer’s Network Trials Unit, which is led by Randall Bateman, MD, the Charles F. and Joanne Knight Distinguished Professor in Neurology at Washington University.