Roy Vagelos to Receive Lifetime Achievement Award at Stanford Drug Discovery Meeting

Dr. P. Roy Vagelos, M.D. began his research career as a senior surgeon and then Section Head of Comparative Biology at the National Institutes of Health. There, he performed fundamental research on lipid metabolism and long-chain fatty acid synthesis, and discovered the acyl-carrier protein (ACP). In 1966, Dr. Vagelos assumed the chairmanship of the Department of Biological Chemistry at Washington University's School of Medicine in St. Louis, and expanded his research to investigate the synthesis of complex lipids and cholesterol.

Dr. Vagelos joined Merck as the Senior Vice President for Research in 1975 and assumed the role of CEO in 1984. At Merck, he utilized his background in lipid and cholesterol metabolism to lead the company’s efforts to pursue the development of the cholesterol-lowering drugs known as statins. Following clinical studies which showed this new class of drugs to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke in individuals with high cholesterol and coronary heart disease, Merck was the first company to bring statins to the market in 1987, starting a true revolution in the prevention of cardiovascular disease.

Dr. Vagelos was also a pioneer in pharmaceutical philanthropy. Ivermectin, a Merck-developed drug with potent anti-parasitic properties, was originally intended for treatment of livestock. However, it was found that the drug was an effective therapy for river blindness, a chronic and debilitating disease disseminated by black flies that is widespread in Africa and Central America which, at that time, was one of the three leading causes of blindness worldwide. Despite lack of government support, Dr. Vagelos and the Merck board committed to providing Ivermectin free of charge to anyone in the world. Since then, the drug has been used to treat hundreds of millions of people for river blindness and elephantiasis. River blindness has been successfully eradicated in Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Guatemala.

Dr. Vagelos has won multiple awards and honors for scientific research and humanitarian leadership. On April 23rd, Dr. Vagelos will receive the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual Stanford Drug Discovery Meeting. The award will be presented by current Merck CEO Ken Frazier and Dr. Paul Berg, recipient of the 1980 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. The meeting will also feature presentations from other academic, industry, and foundation leaders in the drug discovery space, including the President and CEO of CIRM Maria Millan; Robert Bradway and Brent Saunders, the CEOs of Amgen and Allergan respectively; former Novartis CEO Joe Jimenez, as well as Chairman Emeritus of Citigroup and philanthropist Sanford Weill.