

Endocrine therapy passion gives three researchers rock star status

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This afternoon I attended a general session at SABCS where Susan G. Komen for the Cure awarded the Brinker Awards for Scientific Distinction to three researchers for their work in endocrine therapy. Huh? Ok, first, let me give you a definition of what endocrine therapy is. According to the National Cancer Institute, endocrine therapy is:

Treatment that adds, blocks, or removes hormones. For certain conditions (such as diabetes or menopause), hormones are given to adjust low hormone levels. To slow or stop the growth of certain cancers (such as prostate and breast cancer), synthetic hormones or other drugs may be given to block the body's natural hormones. Sometimes surgery is needed to remove the gland that makes a certain hormone. Also called hormonal therapy, hormone therapy, and hormone treatment.

The awards went to Geoffrey L. Greene, PHD of the University of Chicago, Benita Katzenellenbogen, PHD, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, and Professor Ian Smith of the Royal Marsden Hospital of London. In a nutshell, their combined research revolves around understanding estrogen receptors and how we can provoke them respond to treatment.

I'm no scientist, and I promise to stick to "color commentary" from this point forward, but what I can tell you is these guys are heavy hitters. They have not only changed the way cancer is diagnosed and treated, but also how outcomes can be predicted.

In a packed hall with hundreds of docs hanging on every word, each researcher told the audience about their work in endocrine therapy. Dr. Greene's research determined that receptors exist. Dr. Katzenellenbogen's research focused on how receptors respond to various hormones. Dr. Smith's research involved early clinical development of anti-cancer drugs based on this research.

One of the first questions doctors want to know when assessing treatment options for their patients is whether the tumor is ER positive or negative. The answer will determine which treatment pathway to follow. This research will also help doctors determine which patients will (and won't) respond to chemotherapy. More on that tomorrow.

The cure to cancer is complicated, but tonight's award-winners have helped us better understand this deadly disease by finding ways to trick hormones into working with us instead of against us.