

ASHG AWARDS AND ADDRESSES

2017 William Allan Award Introduction: Kári Stefansson¹

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Photograph by Juliana Sohn.

It is a great honor for me to introduce the winner of this year's William Allan Award, Dr. Kári Stefansson. Mark McCarthy may have put it best when, in preparing Kári's nomination, he noted that "It is hard to think of any other human geneticist who has played such a singular and transformative role with respect to the evolution and revolution within our field."

At this meeting, it is impossible to overlook a pervasive paradigm involving biobanks recruited with full population engagement, historical medical registry data, investments in large-scale genetic data collection and statistical methodology, and collaborative follow-up across academic and industry boundaries. What is often overlooked is that Kári and his colleagues at deCODE provided the template for this discovery engine. Moreover, it is easy to forget that when Kári founded deCODE Genetics 21 years ago, these concepts were considered quite radical and unlikely

to succeed. He was both literally and figuratively on a small island of his own. As Peter Donnelly put it, "the number of countries now investing millions in similar resources is an astonishing testament to the perspicacity of his vision."

Since those early days, Kári and his impressive team have made a massively outsized contribution to human genetics—numerous key insights into the genetics of complex diseases such as diabetes, Alzheimer disease, cancer, and many others—as well as innovative and fundamental contributions to our understanding of recombination, mutation, and parent-of-origin effects. It is impossible to do this justice in a few words, but Myles Axton last year pointed out that Kári was an author on 5% of all papers published in *Nature Genetics* over the last 12 years—which should convey somewhat of a picture.

Personally, I have great respect not only for his science but also for the manner in which he conducts it. Despite being in industry, there has never once been a collaborative interaction that was not driven solely by scientific curiosity, and never once were lawyers or material transfer agreements involved when we would exchange results and ideas. A handshake and Kári's word are all that has ever been required.

For the population of Iceland, Kári's commitment has never wavered. As deCODE was built, Kári emphasized that its ultimate success would depend on keeping the trust of the people. His colleagues and countrymen note that he has used his cultural capital to great impact as an advocate for genetic screening and healthcare in general, and in fact, he recently had deCODE donate to the country of Iceland its first-ever PET scanner. And in our many Icelandic vacations through the years, we have never failed to encounter someone who, when finding out what my line of work is, asks with great pride, "Do you know Kári Stefansson?!"

Part warrior-poet in the Viking tradition of his ancestors back to Egil Skallagrimsson, part old-school physician, and 100% genetics visionary—join me in welcoming this year's Allan Award winner, Kári Stefansson.

¹This article is based on the address given by the author at the meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) on October 18, 2017, in Orlando, FL, USA. The video of the original address can be found at the ASHG website.

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