

## Tenure awarded to two NIEHS lead researchers

By Ernie Hood

Achieving tenure is a rare accomplishment for an NIH scientist, but on Nov. 18, two NIEHS Division of Intramural Research (DIR) scientists - Honglei Chen, M.D., Ph.D., and Michael Fessler, M.D. - were granted tenure by the NIH Central Tenure Committee.

"It was a really good day for DIR," said NIEHS Scientific Director Darryl Zeldin, M.D. "The bar at NIH Central Tenure is quite high and the committee is very rigorous, so it's truly unique to get two in one day."

### Fessler's adventure in innate immunity

Fessler is lead researcher in the Clinical Investigation of Host Defense Group in the Laboratory of Respiratory Biology (LRB). His group investigates the role of cholesterol trafficking and lipid rafts in innate immunity, and uses proteomic and translational approaches to discover and validate novel insights into the innate immune response. Fessler received an A.B. from Princeton University in 1992, and an M.D. from Harvard Medical School in 1996. He trained in internal medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and pulmonary/critical care medicine at the University of Colorado, before being recruited in 2006 to join NIEHS as a physician-scientist specializing in immunology.

"He's made several important discoveries on how cholesterol trafficking affects the lung response to environmental factors, and how lung immune responses occur," said Zeldin. "He's a great example of a translational investigator who learns about diseases at the bedside, goes back to the lab and tries to understand basic mechanisms using cell systems and animal models, and then takes what he learns in the lab back to humans to develop novel approaches to treat or prevent disease."

LRB Chief Anton Jetten, Ph.D., agreed. "Dr. Fessler's lab has advanced our understanding of how genetic and environmental determinants of cholesterol homeostasis regulate immune responses to the environment," he said. "We are very happy that he has been awarded tenure, and expect that his future research efforts will make many exciting contributions to this field."

"I expect that tenure and acceptance as a senior investigator will allow me to take my research program to the next level," said Fessler. "It's the culmination of an adventurous and formative period in my research career. Coming to NIEHS gave me unique opportunities and protected time to take scientific risks and to test hypotheses. Achieving tenure is clearly a signpost that our program was on target."

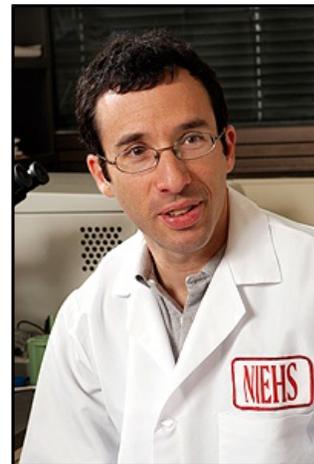
### Chen champions neuroepidemiology

Chen is head of the Aging and Neuroepidemiology Group in the Epidemiology Branch, which studies how environmental and genetic factors affect the risks of age-related neurodegenerative diseases, and the aging process in general. His current research focuses on Parkinson's disease.

Branch Chief Dale Sandler, Ph.D., said that the branch is thrilled Chen has become a tenured investigator. "Dr. Chen has successfully built an internationally recognized and highly productive independent research program on aging and neuroepidemiology," she said. "His work on Parkinson's is of central interest to NIEHS, because of the likelihood of environmental influences, and the need to identify specific causes and preventive strategies."

Chen came to NIEHS in 2005, after a stint at the Harvard School of Public Health. He received his M.D. at Tianjin Medical University in 1993, a master's degree in 1996 from the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, and a Ph.D. from Tufts University in 2001.

"Dr. Chen was recruited in 2005 to enhance the neuroepidemiology part of our portfolio, primarily to look at how the environment influences neurodegenerative disease," said Zeldin. "He's built a number of unique studies that allow us to examine the role of a variety of environmental factors in Parkinson's disease etiology. He's amazingly



*Asked what the impact of achieving tenure would be on his research, Fessler noted, "While you have to remain focused as a senior investigator, I believe that you are now in a position to build upon both the depth and breadth of your research program. While I plan to continue with my existing program goals, I also expect that I will take new directions and continue my growth as a scientist." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*



*Asked how tenure would help advance his science, Chen said, "You will be more recognized in your field, and you can spend more time to think about long-term strategy and long-term goals in your research." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*

productive, and he's made some major discoveries about Parkinson's disease risk."

"Before you get tenure, you really want to establish yourself fast, and get publications out, and attend as many meetings as possible, and let people know you," said Chen. "You still have to do all of those things after tenure, but on the other hand you can think more deeply about the most important questions in your field and expand your research in a more strategic way."

(Ernie Hood is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)

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