

NEWS CENTER

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Case Western Reserve School of Medicine Professor receives Genetics Education Excellence Award

Recognizing a teaching career that has spanned almost half a century, the American Society for Human Genetics (ASHG) recently presented its Award for Excellence in Human Genetics Education to Robert C. Elston, Ph.D., professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. The award is given annually by the ASHG in recognition of outstanding dedication, commitment and contributions to human genetics education.

"I am very honored to receive this award and can hardly thank the committee enough for honoring me," said Elston, who also was the recipient of the Society's prestigious Allan Award in 1996 for substantial and far-reaching scientific contributions to human genetics.



Robert C. Elston

During his career, Elston has mentored more than 40 graduate and 40 post-doctoral students in his tenured positions at Case Western Reserve University, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and the Louisiana State University Medical Center in New Orleans—at the last of which he initiated the creation of master's degree and doctoral programs in human genetics.

Among his other educational initiatives was a doctoral program in Biostatistics at Chapel Hill. Elston said, "I wrote it up because I wanted Ph.D. students in biostatistics who could minor in genetics. It is now one of the best in the country."

He also spearheaded and shepherded through the board of regents a master's degree and doctoral programs in Biometry at the Louisiana State University Medical Center.

Through the Human Genetic Analysis Resource, funded since 1987 by a grant from the National Institute of Health's National Center for Research Resources, Elston developed the Statistical Analysis for Genetic Epidemiology (S.A.G.E.) computer software. This computer program package is used in the genetic analysis of family and pedigree data to better understand the link between family disease history and genetics. Elston has taught courses on the use of the software to well over a thousand persons worldwide, in places like Seoul, Korea, and Leuven, Belgium, and researchers have been using the software for decades.

Elston joined Case Western Reserve in 1995 and now directs the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics' division of genetic and molecular epidemiology. He collaborates with other researchers to develop methods of statistical analysis. This "background" leads colleagues in clinical research to linking diseases with a genetic component.

"If we are going to move towards the future of medicine, we have to believe in genetics," he said. "Believe in it in the sense that genetics give us structure on which we can advance. It provides the 'how' of the biological sciences."

Elston came to the field of genetics and biostatistics from an untraditional path. He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees in natural sciences, followed by a diploma in agriculture, from Cambridge University; and his doctorate in animal breeding from Cornell University.

While an undergraduate, he took a genetics course under Sir Ronald A. Fisher, regarded as the father of classical statistics, but didn't fully appreciate Fisher's work in mathematical statistics until he did post-doctoral work at the University of North Carolina. "Fisher was a very wise man, and my idol," Elston said. "He did genetic research and published on evolution. He never held an academic post as a statistician and considered himself a scientist first and a statistician second."

The award recipient sees a humorous side to his recent honor. He joked, "The mean age of the 12 past recipients of this award is 74. As I am 75, so it would appear that I am typical, and this is an award that comes with old age."

"The important thing," he continued, citing ancient Roman philosopher and orator Cicero's "De Senectute" (On Old Age), "is to have a long and busy career and pass on as much wisdom as one can to the next generation. This is something I have always tried to do."

After receiving an award recognizing a career's worth of work, one that has taken him around the world, Elston has no thoughts of slowing down. "Just keep going," he said of his future plans. "I'd love to have someone take over my administrative duties, just to have more time for research and to teach. I just need a classroom and a pencil and paper—that is my lab!"

For more information contact Jason Tirota, 216.368.6890.

Case Western Reserve University is committed to the free exchange of ideas, reasoned debate and intellectual dialogue. Speakers and scholars with a diversity of opinions and perspectives are invited to the campus to provide the community with important points of view, some of which may be deemed controversial. The views and opinions of those invited to speak on the campus do not necessarily reflect the views of the university administration or any other segment of the university community.

<http://blog.case.edu/case-news/2008/01/29/elston>

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