Association of American Cancer Institutes

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AACI to Recognize Excellence in Cancer Research, Health Equity, and Philanthropy at Annual Meeting

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) will recognize excellence in cancer research, health equity, and philanthropy during the 2026 AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting in Chicago. The awards ceremony will begin at **10:45 am central time** on **Monday, October 26**.

2026 AACI Distinguished Scientist Award

Suresh S. Ramalingam, MD, director of Winship Cancer Institute of Emory University in Atlanta, will present the 2026 Distinguished Scientist Award to internationally recognized immunologist **Rafi Ahmed, PhD**. Dr. Ahmed is director of the Emory Vaccine Center at Emory University School of Medicine; a Georgia Research Alliance Eminent Scholar; and member of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Medicine, the National Academy of Inventors, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

"Dr. Ahmed's seminal discovery of T cell exhaustion in chronic viral infections laid the groundwork for the development of immune checkpoint inhibitors, a class of therapies that has revolutionized cancer treatment," said Dr. Ramalingam, a member of AACI's Board of Directors. "His work has not only elucidated the molecular mechanisms underlying immune dysfunction in cancer but has also directly informed the design of therapeutic strategies that restore immune function in patients. These contributions have had a transformative impact on both basic cancer biology and clinical oncology."

Immediately following the award presentation, Dr. Ahmed will present on CD8 killer T cells, which play a major role in controlling viral infections and tumors but can face functional exhaustion from chronic antigen stimulation. He will review our current understanding of T cell exhaustion and strategies for enhancing their function.

2026 AACI Cancer Health Equity Award

Louis M. Weiner, MD, director of Georgetown Lombardi Cancer Center in Washington, DC, will present the 2026 AACI Cancer Health Equity Award to cancer epidemiologist **Lucile L. Adams-Campbell, PhD**, in recognition of her leadership in addressing cancer disparities.

Dr. Adams-Campbell is the founding director of the Ralph Lauren Center for Cancer Prevention, associate director for minority health and health disparities research, senior associate dean for community outreach and engagement, and distinguished university professor at Georgetown Lombardi . Her research focuses on clinical trials and cancers that disproportionately affect minority and underserved populations, particularly African Americans, in the areas of obesity, metabolic syndrome, and energy balance.

“Dr. Adams-Campbell is a pioneer in the cancer health equity space who has long advocated for community-based participatory research,” Dr. Weiner said.

2026 AACI Champion for Cures Award

AACI President and Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center (FPBCC) Director **Joann B. Sweasy, PhD**, will present the 2026 AACI Champion for Cures Award to the **Cattlemen’s Ball of Nebraska, Inc.**

Since its founding in 1998, the Cattlemen’s Ball has raised more than $21 million to support cancer research at the FPBCC in Omaha. Funds raised by the event support cancer research, clinical care, and community education. Over the past decade alone, pilot awards supported by the fundraiser have helped generate preliminary data for 123 projects, leading to approximately $100 million in external grant funding.

“For more than 25 years, the Cattlemen’s Ball has been an invaluable champion and steadfast partner of the FPBCC. Its support has fueled the center’s growth and helped catalyze paradigm-shifting cancer research,” Dr. Sweasy said.

The AACI awards program was established in 2002 with the Distinguished Scientist Award. The Champion for Cures Award was introduced in 2018, followed by the Cancer Health Equity Award in 2021.

Registration is open for the 2026 AACI/CCAF Annual Meeting, scheduled for **October 24-27** at the Chicago Marriott Downtown Magnificent Mile.

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The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.