

SEPTEMBER 30, 2008

## Biochemist Robert Tjian Elected as New Hughes President



**Image Title:** - Barbara Ries

The Trustees of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute today announce the election of Robert Tjian of the University of California, Berkeley, as the Institute's new president. A distinguished biochemist and long-time HHMI investigator, he will assume his new role on April 1, 2009.

Tjian will succeed Thomas R. Cech, who has served as HHMI's president since January 2000. Cech had announced his decision to step down from the presidency earlier this year in order to return to full-time research and teaching at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

---

**"This is the most interesting job for a scientist in the nation – if not the world – because of its impact on research in the life sciences."**

**- Robert Tjian**

---

“The HHMI has been wonderfully fortunate in its leaders, and we are delighted that Bob Tjian will be continuing that tradition as he builds on the outstanding achievement that has marked Tom Cech's presidency,” said Hanna H. Gray, chairman of the HHMI Trustees and head of the committee that conducted the search.

“Dr. Tjian is not only a distinguished and productive scientist but also a committed teacher and mentor of young scientists,” said Gray, adding that he already has a thorough familiarity with the Institute and its programs in research and education.

“He is known as a person of impeccable taste in science who commands a great breadth of understanding across the life sciences,” said Gray. “We very much look forward to working with Dr. Tjian as he and his colleagues explore the ways by which HHMI can support first-rate scientists and their most promising initiatives.”

Tjian, 59, is a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at UC Berkeley. He has been an HHMI investigator since 1987.

“This is the most interesting job for a scientist in the nation - if not the world - because of its impact on research in the life sciences,” said Tjian. “I feel a sense of responsibility after more than 20 years as an investigator with the Institute. It is a great opportunity to give back and a huge honor to be asked.”

The Institute, a non-profit medical research organization with an endowment of \$17.5 billion at the conclusion of the 2008 fiscal year, ranks as one of the world's largest philanthropies and plays a powerful role in advancing biomedical research and science education in the United States. Over the past two decades, HHMI has made investments of more than \$8.3 billion for the support, training, and education of the nation's most creative and promising scientists.

HHMI believes that scientists of exceptional talent and imagination will make fundamental discoveries of lasting scientific value and benefit to humanity if they are given the resources, time, and freedom to pursue challenging questions. Through its flagship Investigator Program, the Institute employs more than 350 HHMI researchers, among them 12 Nobel laureates and 124 members of the National Academy of Sciences.

These exceptional scientists direct Institute research laboratories on the campuses of 67 universities, medical schools, and other research organizations throughout the United States. In a complementary program at its Janelia Farm Research Campus in Ashburn, Virginia, the Institute brings together leading scientists from disparate disciplines to use emerging and innovative technologies to pursue biology's most challenging problems.

The Institute also has a philanthropic grants program that emphasizes initiatives with the power to transform graduate and undergraduate education in the life sciences. Additionally, it supports the work of biomedical researchers in many countries around the globe, particularly in the areas of infectious disease and parasitology.

Tjian was born in Hong Kong, the youngest of nine children. His family fled China before the Communist Revolution and eventually settled in New Jersey. Known as a voracious consumer of scientific information and data, Tjian famously talked his way into the biochemistry laboratory of the late Daniel Koshland as a Berkeley undergraduate - even though he had never taken a single course in the subject.

Tjian went on to receive a bachelor's degree in biochemistry from Berkeley in 1971 and a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1976. After completing a post-doctoral fellowship at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory with James Watson, he joined the Berkeley faculty in 1979. At Berkeley, Tjian has assumed a variety of leadership roles, including spearheading a major campus initiative to support and implement new paradigms for bioscience teaching and research. He currently serves as the Director of the Berkeley Stem Cell Center, and the Faculty Director of the Li Ka Shing Center for Biomedical and Health Sciences. He is a member of the National Academy of Science and has received many awards honoring his scientific contributions, including the Alfred P. Sloan Prize from the General Motors Cancer Research Foundation and the Louisa Gross Horwitz Prize from Columbia University. He was named California Scientist of the Year in 1994.

Understanding how genes work is one of the great achievements of modern biology and Tjian's contributions to this body of knowledge have been

significant and pioneering. He studies the biochemical steps involved in controlling how genes are turned on and off, key steps in the process of decoding the human genome. He discovered proteins called transcription factors that bind to specific sections of DNA and play a critical role in controlling how genetic information is transcribed and translated into the thousands of biomolecules that keep cells, tissues, and organisms alive. Tjian's laboratory has illuminated the relationship between disruptions in the process of transcription and human diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and Huntington's. More recently, he has begun studying how transcription factors control the differentiation of embryonic stem cells into muscle, liver, and neurons.

Tjian will continue some laboratory research at the nearby Janelia Farm Research Campus and at Berkeley while serving as HHMI's president at its headquarters in Chevy Chase, Maryland. He already collaborates with a small team of visiting scientists at Janelia Farm on a project to develop new approaches that will allow them to image biochemical activities in single living cells.

Tjian and his wife, Claudia, an attorney, have two daughters.