

Early Career Immunologist in the Spotlight

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Research for which the prize was received

Understanding how immune cells recognize and eliminate tumor cells is central to improving immunotherapy. Traditional reductionist models often fail to capture the complexity of immune–tumor interactions. We discovered that tumor-reactive T cells form stable clusters with tumor cells and antigen presenting cells (APCs) that can be isolated and expanded directly from patient biopsies. During my PhD, I developed methods to study their functionality from patient tumor biopsies and now I combine them with spatial technologies to map the immune interactome in cancer and autoimmunity.

How does this funding/prize contribute to your future?

The Bright Spark Award by the Dutch Society of Immunology (NVVI) will serve to visualize my starting research line and further develop it in the future. I had the great opportunity to present our recent work at the Annual Meeting of NVVI, where I was able to connect with other immunologists and discuss potential future collaborations to expand the use of my method. This enthusiastic environment not only motivated me to continue doing my current research in the highest quality I can but also opened up new interesting directions.

What do you see as the biggest challenge in immunology?

The immune system is extraordinarily complex, making it difficult to identify a single defining challenge. In my view, one of the central goals in immunology is understanding how the immune system balances activation and tolerance. This delicate regulation is fundamental to many immunological disorders, including cancer and autoimmune diseases. Maintaining this equilibrium requires continuous communication and interaction among diverse immune cell types. My current research focuses on uncovering these cellular interactions using my approach, and I am particularly interested in understanding the nature of the “conversations” immune cells are having within the body.

What is your most important advice to young immunology researchers?

As a researcher, passion for your work is essential—it is the driving force behind the pursuit of scientific questions. Engage with others, share ideas, and continuously develop new hypotheses. Most importantly, enjoy testing those ideas in the lab. Science is creative, exciting, and fun—but it also demands commitment and hard work.

How do you take care of a good work-home balance?

Maintaining a healthy work–life balance is an ongoing challenge, especially in research. I try to be mindful of setting boundaries and making time for activities outside the lab that help me recharge. Staying active, spending time with family and friends, and stepping away from work when possible allow me to return with renewed focus and creativity.