

Malik Lab celebrates 20 years of collegiality and scientific discovery

Symposium and reunion of researchers make for a 'great day to celebrate all of your and Harmit's accomplishments'

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Current and former staff in the Malik Lab celebrate Dr. Harmit Malik's 20th anniversary of being a principal investigator at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center.

Photo by Connor O'Shaughnessy

Friends and colleagues from all over the world returned to Fred Hutch to honor the Malik Lab's twentieth anniversary; the lab first opened its doors in 2003. Current and former trainees marked the occasion with a symposium, entitled *The Return of the Red Queen*, where they presented current work and highlighted the impact that **Harmit Malik, PhD**, has had on their lives and careers.

The symposium was organized by **Malik Lab** manager Aida de la Cruz, and former trainees Patrick Mitchell, PhD, and Matthew Daugherty, PhD. Its name draws inspiration from the **Red Queen Hypothesis** in evolutionary biology where creatures need to adapt to simply maintain their fitness within their environment.

The hypothesis's name itself is in turn a literary reference to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. This concept is key to much of the Malik Lab's research studying genetic conflict — the competition between genes and proteins with opposing functions that drive evolutionary change. Unraveling the mechanisms of competition both within and between organisms has significant implications for our understanding of viral infection and cancer.

"This is a great day to celebrate all of your and Harmit's accomplishments," said Basic Sciences Director Sue Biggins, PhD. to the packed crowd in Pelton Auditorium. "You all have so much to be proud of."

"You know it's a special day because Harmit got up extra early," she joked, before highlighting Malik's impact on the division, as well as some of his many awards and accomplishments.

These include election to the American Academy of Microbiology, the American Society of Microbiology, the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Malik also recently received the Novitski Prize in genetics research.

Biggins also emphasized one of the awards for which Malik is most proud, the McDougall Mentoring Award, which is selected by the Fred Hutch Student Postdoc Advisory Committee and was presented to Malik in 2018.

An 'ideal mentor'

"Harmit possesses genius not just in science, but also in the social and personal aspects of science as well," said Sara Sawyers, PhD., the Malik Lab's very first postdoctoral fellow. "He is a powerful model of the ideal mentor that we all now strive to emulate."

Malik first joined Fred Hutch in 1999 as a postdoctoral fellow in the lab of Basic Sciences faculty, Steve Henikoff, PhD; he said he was merely part of a "chain of exceptional mentoring received throughout his career" and that he knows his trainees will continue throughout theirs.

"Everything about me is really a reflection of what I've learned from my mentors," Malik said. "What I learned from Steve is that he always has your back. And the wilder your idea, the more he would be along for the ride with you. He taught me that It's better to be wrong in an interesting way than right in a boring way. Boring is not going to push the gears of science."

During Henikoff's introduction to the Monday afternoon speakers, he recalled receiving Malik's postdoctoral application, being impressed, and thinking, "How can I get him to come to my lab and how can we keep him at Fred Hutch?"

Henikoff's hopes were not only met when Malik joined his lab, but were to be fully realized when Malik decided to stay at Fred Hutch, becoming a faculty member in 2003 when he opened his lab on the third floor of the Weintraub building. Starting in 2019, Malik has also began serving as co-associate director of Basic Sciences.

"I'm so grateful for everything he does for everyone in the division," Biggins said. "We are super lucky to have him at the Hutch."

Over his lab's 20-year history, Malik has mentored or co-mentored over 80 graduate students, technicians, staff scientists and postdoctoral fellows. More than 30 of Malik's current and ex-trainees gave talks across the symposium's two days. Although, as Molly Ohainle, PhD, a Malik Lab alumna and current faculty member at University of California, Berkeley, pointed out, "There are no ex-trainees with Harmit. He will always be there to mentor you, even after you've left his lab."

'Creativity and kindness'

The talks covered a wide range of topics, from developing better model systems for studying HIV to improving educational systems. In addition to sharing their work, the speakers all drew attention to the positive impact that Malik and their time in his lab has had on their lives, including former Malik Lab postdoctoral fellow Antoine Molaro, PhD.

“Being in the Malik Lab has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life,” Molaro said. “Harmit not only helped me find my voice in science but he also helped me work on myself to better mentor others. I wonder if I'll ever experience the level of creativity and kindness found in the Malik Lab. As we move in our careers, I know we all try to emulate what we've experienced while in the Malik Lab.”

Closing out the symposium, Malik mentioned that after a colleague heard about this anniversary celebration, they told him he was too young to retire. Malik was quick to waylay any fears — and elicit a round of cheers — by telling the symposium crowd, “I am not retiring!”

“It is a rare privilege to have nearly all my scientific influences, both my mentors and trainees, here in this room together,” he said in closing. “I hope you get to have that privilege at some point in your life.”

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