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MEDIA RELEASE

AAAS-SFU research: Searching for gold in cancer treatment

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If there's one molecule Robert Young, a Simon Fraser University chemistry professor, wishes he could control, it's an enzyme that makes cells cannibalize their waste.

Young will explain why during *Novel Assays and Inhibitors of the Key Autophagy Protease*, a talk during the seminar *Autophagy: An Emerging Therapeutic Target in Human Disease*, at the world's largest science fair.

The fair — the 2012 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) conference — is underway at the Vancouver Convention Centre (VCC) until Mon., Feb. 20.

The seminar featuring Young's presentation runs Saturday, Feb. 18 from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. in Room 205-207 in the VCC West Building. Young's presentation begins at 2:30 p.m.

If researchers can find a molecule that controls the enzyme that triggers autophagy, an intercellular self-eating process that recycles cells' garbage, then they may discover an important drug target for cancer treatment.

Young, previously vice-president of Medicinal Chemistry at Merck Frosst Canada and the inventor of Singulair®, a breakthrough drug to treat asthma and seasonal allergic rhinitis, knows this discovery would be as good as gold.

"What's interesting to us," says Young, "is autophagy is a process that many cancer cells hijack when they are stressed during rapid tumour growth or in response to attack from anti-cancer drugs and therapies.

"It's the way they resist these treatments and survive to keep on growing. We think that if we inhibit the autophagy process we'll stop that resistance and so make cancer therapy more effective.

"No such molecule has been discovered yet," says Young, who is working with a team of researchers at SFU, University of Victoria, UBC and the B.C. Cancer agency to uncover it. "Striking gold would be the first step to developing a drug that would be useful adjunctive therapy along with other anti-cancer treatments."

Young is one of seven SFU scientists involved in research presentations at the AAAS.

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