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Laureates of the 2008 L'Oreal Unesco For Women In Science Awards: (from left) Asst Prof Dr V. Narry Kim, Prof Dr Elizabeth Blackburn, Prof Dr Ada Yonath, Prof Dr Lihadh Al-Gazali and Prof Dr Ana Belen Elgoyhen. - Picture courtesy of L'Oreal

Passion for research

L'Oreal pays tribute to women in science.

Stories by **WONG LI ZA**
wongliza@thestar.com.my

WHEN she was six, Ada Yonath did an experiment at the balcony of her home to find out if water moved faster than kerosene. Unfortunately, the house caught fire when her father came out for a smoke!

Today, Israeli Prof Dr Ada Yonath is a multi-award winning structural biologist who was recently named one of the five exceptional scientists who won the 2008 L'Oreal-UNESCO For Women In Science Laureate Award.

Held at the Unesco Headquarters in Paris last

month, this year's ceremony also marked the 10th anniversary of the award. It was attended by over 40 past laureates.

One could not help but notice the stark difference between the modern concrete, steel and glass design of the building, and the other architectural wonders that characterise the city of romance.

However, there was no mistaking the excitement and importance of the event that was to take place inside.

This year, the laureate awards went to Prof Dr Ada Yonath (Europe) for her structural studies of the protein biosynthesis system; Prof Dr Lihadh Al-Gazali (Africa and Arab States) for characterisation of inherited disorders; Asst Prof V. Narry Kim (Asia Pacific) for her work in a new class of gene-regulating RNA molecules; Prof Dr Ana Belen Elgoyhen (Latin America) for her research in understanding the molecular basis of hearing; and Prof Dr Elizabeth Blackburn (North

America) for her discovery of the nature of chromosome ends, and their roles in cancer and ageing.

The five laureates were selected by an international jury presided by Prof Gunter Blobel, and Prof Christian de Duve, both past Nobel prize winners in medicine.

This year, the awards were for achievements in the life sciences. Each laureate, selected from each of five continents, received US\$100,000 (RM320,000).

Blobel, also president of the Life Sciences Jury, said the main achievement of the awards programme was recognising the contribution of women scientists in all continents, especially Africa, Asia and Latin America.

"We have tremendous talents in science in developing countries and most of these brilliant women face great difficulties in the lack of

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FROM preserving biodiversity in the Balkan underground caves to exploring the wound-healing potential of a catfish excretion, the intention of the 2008 L'Oreal-UNESCO For Women In Science Fellowship recipients was clear - to improve the lives of mankind.

The 15 young fellows (aged below 35) in the life sciences are doctoral and post-doctoral women who will pursue their research in host institutions outside their home country. Each fellow will receive US\$40,000 (RM128,000) over two years.

"90% of money in research is spent on diseases that affect only 10% of the population. I think that is unfair so that's why I chose to research tuberculosis and hope that it will be put on a higher agenda," said Alma Tostmann, fellow from The Netherlands.

The 15 fellows' areas of research are diverse - from exploring the effect of diabetes on the efficacy of tuberculosis drugs in Tanzanian

Improving lives

patients, to examining the impact of diseases on coral communities of the Western Indian Ocean, to the production of stem cells for therapeutic treatment.

"All the fellows pursue unique fields with the aim of improving humanity and the well-being of people on this planet," said Patricia Pineau, L'Oreal's research communications director.

For the awards, three fellows were selected from each of the five regions of Africa, the Arab States, Asia Pacific, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

This year, four new countries to win the fellowship awards were Gabon, Mongolia, Nepal and Slovenia. The other countries were

Mozambique, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Italy and The Netherlands.

As of 2008, the programme has recognised 120 fellows from 67 countries. This year, the selection committee received 108 entries from 58 countries.

Malaysia has had two international fellows since the award was launched. In 2001, biochemical engineer Dr Suraini Abdul Aziz, currently an associate professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, became the first Malaysian to win the fellowship.

In 2006, Nyon Mun Peak, a structural biologist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, won the award.

Inspiring the next generation

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structures for research, cultural resistance or the scarcity of local role models," he said.

De Duve, founding president of the award, said all the laureates value the importance of basic scientific research.

"They share the tremendous desire for understanding and exploring unknown territories that leads to major discoveries. It is important to put faces to this passion for research and it's a privilege for me to meet the new laureates each year," he said.

To date, 52 laureates have been recognised since the award was first introduced in 1998.

"In the 10 years since the awards were created, the laureates have become ambassadors and role models for the next generation of women scientists," said Beatrice Dautresme, vice president of L'Oreal, during the award ceremony.

Dautresme is one of the founders of the For Women in Science programme, created in partnership with Unesco. The laureate award was the first international accolade devoted to women in science.

Besides the laureate award, international fellowships (15 per year) and national-level fellowships have also been given under the programme since 2000.

■ *In the past 10 years, there has been no nomination from Malaysia for the L'Oreal-Unesco For Women in Science Laureate award. Eligible scientists or those who know of such women are encouraged to send in nominations. For details, go to: forwomeninscience.com / loreal.com / loreal.com.my / unesco.org.*

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