

President's Letter

Investing in the Basics

NOT LONG AGO, we had a health scare in my family. My sister was diagnosed with a rare disease. To make matters worse, her treatment caused a cascade of side effects that landed her in the hospital. No one in my family could understand why this was happening. So I went to Los Angeles and met with her doctor. After a lengthy discussion, I could finally piece together the trail of events that led to her illness and explain what was making my sister so sick.

Faced with serious illness, most people struggle to comprehend what seems like a foreign language. But understanding the situation, and being able to connect the dots, is critical to making informed health care decisions. That kind of deep understanding—for health care providers, as well as those of us on the receiving end—can't happen without foundational knowledge about how the body works. You've got to understand how something works before you can fix it.

At HHMI, our goal is to make that basic knowledge, that understanding, possible. We do that by finding and supporting the most talented scientists, giving them the

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—ROBERT TJIAN



freedom to follow their instincts and apply creative approaches to hard problems. We have long described our strategy as funding “people, not projects.” In this issue of the *HHMI Bulletin*, you will meet 27 such people: the latest group of researchers to be named HHMI Investigators.

Each of these scientists is building on an already impressive body of work, and we want to share those stories. Today, more than ever, HHMI is working to raise the visibility of basic research. We believe deeply in supporting quality science and science education, and we are eager to discuss strategies for doing that with other like-minded organizations and individuals. Ultimately, we hope to dramatically increase investments in science.

To achieve this goal, we are collaborating with public and private partners, to raise awareness of the importance of foundational or “basic” research. If we want others to understand the value of basic scientific

research, we've got to let them know why and help them appreciate what science is about. If we succeed, people may be better informed. They may know the right questions to ask in a tough medical situation, they may be motivated to support biomedical research, or they may understand how to inspire students toward careers in science.

I'm happy to say that my sister is doing fine now. I'm grateful that I was able to interpret her doctor's information, so that my family understood what was happening. I wish the same for every family in our situation. Over time, I believe, our work at HHMI contributes to the basic knowledge we all need to make better decisions, stay informed, and understand the world around us.