After demoting a scientist and cutting her pay, University of Pennsylvania makes millions from her mRNA breakthroughs

The University of Pennsylvania is basking in the glow of two researchers who [recently] were awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine for their pioneering work on messenger RNA.

Until recently, the school and its faculty largely disdained one of those scientists.

Penn demoted Katalin Karikó, shunting her to a lab on the outskirts of campus while cutting her pay. Karikó’s colleagues denigrated her mRNA research and some wouldn’t work with her, according to her and people at the school. Eventually, Karikó persuaded another Penn researcher, Drew Weissman, to work with her on modifying mRNA for vaccines and drugs, though most others at the school remained skeptical, pushing other approaches.

Then she and Weissman achieved a breakthrough. They modified the base components, or nucleosides, of mRNA, to avert an inflammatory response. Now, the molecule could get into cells to create ample proteins, the key to producing vaccines and drugs.

Penn patented their mRNA technology. Karikó and Weissman tried to license it for their biotech company but couldn’t afford the price the school demanded, Weissman recalled.

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