Nature Award for Mentoring Italy 2013

Speech by Michela Matteoli

In 1992 after a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale University, I opened my own laboratory in the Department of Pharmacology at the CNR Center of Cellular and Molecular Pharmacology, in Milan. My group’s research has always been focused on studying synapses, the fundamental brain structures that mediate the transfer of information between nerve cells, controlling all body functions and all aspects of cognition, including attention, perception, and learning. My laboratory has contributed to this field of research by identifying important functional roles for synaptic proteins involved in psychiatric disorders and neurodevelopment, and is currently involved in defining the extent to which activation of the immune system and inflammation cooperate with genetic factors in the onset of neurological and psychiatric diseases.

Since establishing my laboratory, I have mentored dozens of researchers during the course of their undergraduate theses, graduate studies or postdoctoral fellowships. I am also providing structural support for some excellent researchers in the group who are just starting their careers, while they search for their own funding. I learned only a few days before the nomination deadline that a large group of people who had worked in my laboratory over the past 20 years had decided to nominate me for this award. I was very struck by the fact that so many people in different parts of the world, had got together and decided enthusiastically to nominate me for this prestigious award. My joy was truly enormous. I tried to understand why these brilliant researchers, laboratory alumni, had decided to propose my name. I then realized that even people who had left the lab many years ago still consider it a point of reference and think of me as a person to contact in case of need, or for advice on a major career choice or on experiments. When I put this into focus, I was really proud of it.

I honestly do not think I am doing anything special, if not encouraging people to pursue their scientific interests and helping them to identify their own personal abilities. Among people interested in science, some have a clear tendency to become excellent researchers, while others have strong business acumen that would be a shame not to develop. Each of them is different. I always tried to help people make better use of their own inclinations, encouraging them to always pursue the highest quality, with the greatest intellectual honesty.

For me this award, created by the prestigious journal Nature, is a very important recognition that involves not only my scientific activities, but also the personal and relational ones. For this reason, I have given a lot of thought to how best to use the economic contribution associated with the prize. In the end, I decided to use it as the first seed for the creation of a fund to support research studies on the molecular mechanisms underlying neurodevelopmental diseases. I hope that it will grow!

I am very proud to have received this award and I am proud to be here today at the institutional heart of our nation, to receive it from the hands of our President. I am also
happy to have my family with me, who always supported and helped me on my path, patiently and lovingly. I hope I was able to do the best also for them, as I always suggest to the people in my laboratory.