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University of Lethbridge honours Dr. Igor Kovalchuk with 2015 Speaker Research Award

Recognized as a pioneering researcher at the forefront of plant genome stability and the burgeoning field of epigenetics, Dr. Igor Kovalchuk has been named the 2015 winner of the University of Lethbridge's Speaker Research Award.

Since coming to the University of Lethbridge's Department of Biological Sciences in 2001, Kovalchuk has gained the reputation as a world leader in epigenetics, which studies how individual genes are expressed by environmental factors.

Specifically, he is investigating how plants evolve rapidly to handle various stressors such as temperature extremes, viruses, bacteria and toxic or nutritionally



deficient soil. His goal is to understand how plants are capable of acclimating, adapting and passing those acquired traits on to their progeny.

His work has developed various molecular techniques that can be used to create stronger and hardier plants that are able to resist a constantly changing environment to satisfy the demands of the agricultural biotechnology industry. He has also developed novel plant biomonitors that are used by more than 40 labs in more than 20 countries.

Kovalchuk's expertise has also been recognized commercially, leading to a strategic alliance that may shape the future of the pharmaceutical production of codeine in Canada. His patented technologies, including cutting-edge methods for bioengineering poppy plants, make it possible to produce transgenic plants with high levels of codeine. The development of a poppy industry using high thebaine plants produced in Canada is vital to a country that is among the world's top importers of raw poppy material per capita.

A driving force behind the establishment of the Alberta Epigenetics Network, the first epigenetic network in Canada, Kovalchuk's lab has created valuable collaborative opportunities with research institutions, government agencies and multinational companies alike. In 2013, ASTech honoured Kovalchuk with the Innovation in Agricultural Science Award, in part for his epigenetic research.

Always eager to involve students in his research activities, Kovalchuk has inspired the next generation of scientists and trained more than 100 undergraduate and graduate students and post-doctoral fellows at the University of Lethbridge. He has co-authored multiple papers with graduate students and provided young researchers with incredible opportunities to be involved in high-level projects.

Kovalchuk will be presented with the Speaker Research Award at the Fall 2015 Convocation ceremony, Saturday, October 17, 2015 at 10 a.m. in the 1st Choice Savings Centre for Sport and Wellness.

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