

Press Release, May 27, 2026

Henrik Kaessmann receives the Ernst Schering Prize 2026 for his pathbreaking research on the evolution of organs such as the brain

The Schering Stiftung awards the Ernst Schering Prize 2026 to Prof. Dr. Henrik Kaessmann from the Center for Molecular Biology of Heidelberg University (ZMBH). He receives the 50,000-euro award for his pathbreaking discoveries on the evolution of gene regulation and the emergence of new genes.

Born in 1971, Kaessmann is one of the most influential evolutionary geneticists of his generation. Through his large-scale gene expression analyses in humans and many other vertebrates – from chimpanzees to mice and platypuses to chickens and fish –, Prof. Kaessmann has made seminal contributions to the study of the evolution of mammals.

He has fundamentally changed our understanding of the evolutionary origins and genetic regulation of organ development and organ function in vertebrates, including humans. Prof. Kaessmann's work decodes how genes are activated and controlled in different cells and organs, thus also establishing important reference frameworks for biomedical research.

His comparative datasets and analyses provide foundational baselines and new approaches to studying a variety of diseases, especially of the brain, liver, and reproductive organs. For example, his work has revealed promising candidate genes that are likely to be involved in health risks or fertility. Particularly noteworthy are his studies on cell-type diversification in the evolving mammalian brain, as well as his pioneering work on the emergence of new genes and their contribution to the evolution of gene expression programs.

"What really excites me is that such comparisons allow us to track down evolutionary changes in gene regulation that have helped shape human-specific traits. By tracing gene expression programs from early vertebrate ancestors all the way to humans, we have, for example, been able to identify the changes that, throughout evolution, have contributed to the development of our unusually large and complex brain and to human-specific metabolic and nutritional adaptations in the liver," says Henrik Kaessmann.

What is remarkable is that Prof. Kaessmann was nominated for this year's Schering Prize independently by two leading scientists from different disciplines.

One of the nominators, Nobel laureate Prof. Dr. Svante Pääbo, director at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, emphasized: "By pioneering systematic cross-species analyses of gene expression evolution, Henrik Kaessmann has fundamentally advanced our understanding of how regulatory changes and the forces of natural selection have driven the evolution of major organs – particularly the brain, liver, and gonads."

Another nomination came from Prof. Dr. Stefan Pfister, division head at the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) and professor at the Medical Faculty Heidelberg of Heidelberg University. Kaessmann's work, he said, "uniquely integrates evolutionary biology, developmental genomics, and molecular biology, opening new conceptual pathways for understanding how complex biological systems arise and function." Pfister particularly emphasized the fact that Kaessmann's evolutionary single-cell studies on brain development provide the first framework linking cell-type diversification to vertebrate brain evolution – with immediate relevance for the study of neuronal diseases and of brain tumors in children.

Prof. Dr. Max Löhning, chairman of the Foundation Council of the Schering Stiftung, explained the choice of the prize winner as follows: "Henrik Kaessmann stands for a science that shifts boundaries – both methodically and conceptually. His research combines evolutionary basic research with medical relevance in ways that really excite us as a foundation. With this prize, we not only honor past achievements but a scientific vision with high hopes for the future."

The award ceremony will take place on November 17, 2026, at the Leibniz Hall of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Berlin.



About Henrik Kaessmann

Prof. Dr. Henrik Kaessmann is professor at the Center for Molecular Biology of Heidelberg University (ZMBH). With more than 75 high-ranking publications and over 20,000 citations, he is one of the most influential evolutionary geneticists of his generation. Honors for his research include three highly funded grants from the European Research Council, as well as prestigious awards such as the Friedrich Miescher Award and the Cloëtta Prize. He is an EMBO Member, a newly elected member of Leopoldina, and has supervised more than 25 postdocs and 23 doctoral students, many of whom today hold leading positions in science.

About the Schering Stiftung and the Ernst Schering Prize

The Schering Stiftung is a nonprofit foundation based in Berlin. Launched in 2002 by Schering AG, it is legally and financially independent. It promotes the life sciences, the contemporary arts, and projects at the interface of science and art. The Ernst Schering Prize was established in 1991 by the Ernst Schering Research Foundation and has been awarded annually by the Schering Stiftung since 2003. The 50,000-euro prize honors scientists worldwide. It is named after the Berlin pharmacist and company founder Ernst Christian Friedrich Schering (1824–1889).

Additional Information and Press Contact

This press release and images of the prize winner can be found at <https://scheringstiftung.de/de/presse/>

Lucia Miarka, phone: +49 (0)30-20 62 29-67, e-mail: miarka@scheringstiftung.de