

# Lasker award: Passport to a Nobel prize?

Yes, it can be a ticket to Stockholm,  
but for some not-so-obvious reasons

by Joan Arehart-Treichel

Since the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology was initiated in 1895, it has become the most prestigious international award for biomedical research. Since the Albert Lasker Medical Research Awards were set up in 1946, they have become the most prestigious American awards for biomedical research. The interval we are now in between the announcement on Nov. 16 of the winners of the 1972 Lasker awards (SN: 11/18/72, p. 326) and the forthcoming presentation on Dec. 10 in Stockholm of the 1972 Nobel prize in medicine seems a good time to inquire into a long-standing, yet little plumbed question. Why, during the past 27 years, have 22 Lasker recipients gone on to capture a Nobel prize?

Critics of Mary Lasker, president of the Lasker Foundation and a powerful force in medical research politics (she helped build the National Institutes of Health and was a moving force behind the National Cancer Act of 1972), have proposed some not-so-favorable reasons. "The Lasker awards were set up to scoop the Nobel prizes." "Lasker committees and Nobel committees are in cahoots." "The tidy \$10,000 a Lasker recipient receives allows him to accelerate his research efforts and get a Nobel prize." But interviews with Mary Lasker, past Lasker award judges and Lasker awardees point to some less simplified reasons.

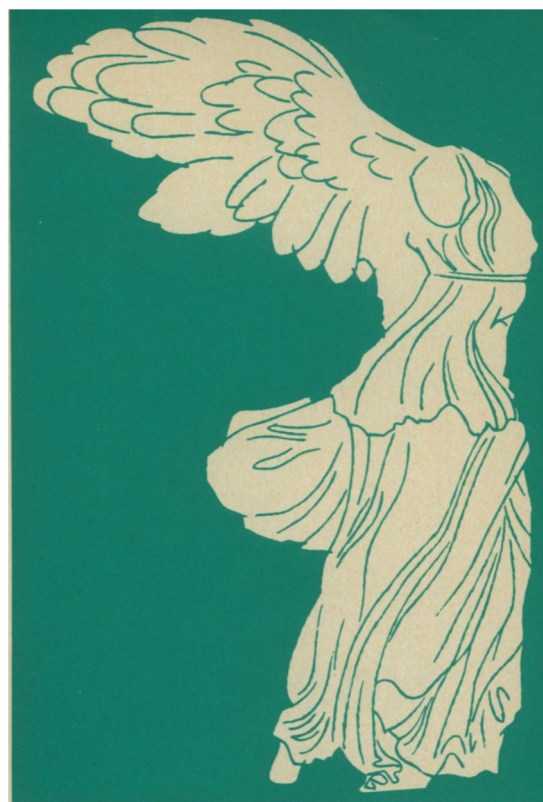
One Lasker winner, for example, says he doubts whether the Lasker

awards were set up to pre-pick Nobelists, "but when it started to work out that way, the Lasker committee became conscious of it and bragged about it a little." Mary Lasker told SCIENCE NEWS the Lasker awards were not set up to pre-pick Nobelists, and if Lasker recipients receive Nobel prizes she is "happy," yet doesn't make any special issue about it. But she doesn't exactly ignore it either. In the booklet listing all past Lasker award winners, the names of those who have won Nobel prizes are carefully underlined and noted with an asterisk.

As for Lasker committee members predisposing Nobel committee members to select Lasker winners for a Nobel award, Irving Wright of Cornell University Medical College and a Lasker award judge for many years, attests: "To my knowledge—and I know the situation well—the Lasker committee has never approached the Nobel committee. I know a number of scientists on the Nobel committee, but it is something we have never discussed."

Recipients of Lasker awards tend to agree that it is doubtful whether the \$10,000 Lasker award money might help an awardee accelerate his research and better qualify for a Nobel prize. Asserts Edward Freis of the Veterans Administration Hospital in Washington, a 1971 Lasker winner for treating hypertensive patients with drugs, "The funds are for personal purposes, not for scientific research, by and large. And they are not big enough, really, to support much scientific research nowadays." "You could use the money for research," Seymour Benzer of the California Institute of Technology and a 1971 Lasker winner for work on the chemistry of heredity contends, "but it would be a drop in the bucket." Charles Yanofsky of Stanford University and also a 1971 Lasker winner agrees. "No, the money does not affect the work one does."

Why, then, have many Lasker awardees gone on to win a Nobel prize? Various Lasker judges and recipients concur it is largely because Lasker award criteria and Nobel award criteria are similar. A past judge, Lyman Craig of Rockefeller University, asserts, "The criteria for the two awards are about the same as you can



*Symbol of the Albert Lasker awards.*

get. Of course it depends on the individual views of committee members."

"Both awards," Yanofsky observes, "go for fundamental discoveries of general significance—something science as a whole will accept as a solution to a specific problem, introducing or establishing scientific concepts."

"Both committees are looking at the same kinds of people," Benzer says, "and it is not surprising that there should be some correlations. Certainly they are both trying to concern themselves with things that are relevant to medicine." Wright observes that the Nobel committee is more interested in intellectual achievement (science for science's sake); the Lasker committee, in achievements that may alleviate major diseases or prolong life. So the reason many Lasker winners go on for a Nobel prize, he maintains, is that "many of the best contributions with clinical implications are also excellent intellectual discoveries."

Mary Lasker contends the reason many Lasker winners receive a Nobel prize later is that the Lasker "jury is informed and picks outstanding candidates." Some Lasker judges and winners agree. "That the Lasker judges pick so many people who go on to win a Nobel award," Bernard Brodie of the National Heart and Lung Institute and a 1967 Lasker winner for work in biochemical pharmacology acknowledges, "is a compliment to the way they pick them." Comments George Palade, a past Lasker judge and also winner of a 1966 Lasker award for work in electron microscopy of biological materials: "I think it is con-

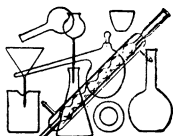


*Mary Lasker: Happy, but no big issue.*

december 2, 1972

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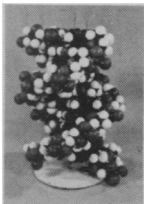
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nected with the quality of the Lasker juries. The members represent the domains of activity of current science. You are dealing with people who have prominent positions in their field. These are people who know exactly what is going on in science at the right moment."

According to various Lasker judges, the method of selection of Lasker winners is also excellent, and might explain why Lasker recipients are frequently tapped by the Nobel committee. Nominations come from various scientists around the United States. The Lasker judges make an effort to extend nominations from various universities and research centers. The Lasker foundation staff compiles dossiers on the professional contributions of each nominee. The judges review these dossiers and discuss which nominee's work meets the objectives of the Lasker awards. Then they compile a list of the strongest candidates and vote on them by secret ballot. The candidates who receive the most votes are discussed and defended further. There is another secret ballot. More discussion. Another ballot. This way the nominees are narrowed down until the judges arrive at the winners. The overall selection process takes about six months.

This process, Wright declares, "represents a superior screening of the top medical scientists in the country. It is not a matter of selecting 'my friend

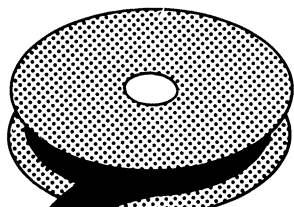
so-and-so.' The public frequently thinks awards are made by somebody who likes somebody, that a little group gets together and gives an award. This is true of many awards, scientific and otherwise. But it is not the case with the Lasker awards." Palade agrees: "The general excellence of the overall process explains why many of the Lasker winners are also selected by the Nobel committee."

Some Lasker judges also recognize the possibility that as the judgment and selection behind the Lasker awards have become recognized over the years, Nobel judges may be more liable to give greater consideration to Nobel nominees who have won a Lasker award. "The Nobel committee," Wright remarks, "knows that the Lasker winner has already been screened by his peers in the United States to be one of the outstanding scientists in the world." "The good judgment of the Lasker committee," Freis observes, "draws the attention of the Nobel committee."

If the reason Lasker awardees often go on to win Nobel prizes is hard to pinpoint, so also is the impact of such awards on the course of medical science. The awards probably have minimal influence on the research of many investigators. About winning a Lasker award, Benzer recalls, "I had no idea. It was a complete surprise." Brodie says, "I did not know my name was up for it." A Lasker winner who prefers not to be quoted admits, "I had never heard of the Lasker award until I won it. I don't think my students know about it either." Asked whether he now anticipates a Nobel prize because he won a Lasker award, Yanofsky replies, "Who knows? I'll let someone else decide." Other scientists, however, are probably conscious of the Lasker and Nobel awards and subconsciously, at least, try to do better research because of them. "Lasker awards," Freis contends, "are motivating influences on investigators. They do better research on account of them."

Is the impact of Lasker awards and Nobel prizes on medical science beneficial? "Oh, I suppose the awards are good," Brodie acknowledges. He regrets, though, "that for everyone who gets an award, there are probably 50 good people who don't." He believes that the awards are usually given for work that the judges see as an immediate breakthrough or practicality. Yet many people, he contends, are laying groundwork, sometimes revolutionizing a whole field, but do not get an award because it is difficult to pin their names to a particular achievement. "One can name in history many people who should have gotten an award but didn't, yet we only realize it years later." □

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