

ON ISEF'S 40TH ANNIVERSARY: THANK YOU

DR. MOSHE ELKABETS wants to feel that the work he does is important for the world. When he started studying at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, he didn't yet know what that would be. "The vision came when I started doing research and was exposed to different fields," he says. "I found I wanted to do cancer research, and more practically to focus on cancer therapy. That's what I trained for and that's what I am doing."

The training encompassed three degrees from BGU culminating in a Ph.D., three years of postdoctoral work in Boston at Brigham and Woman's Hospital-Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital, and two and a half more years of research at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

By the time he completed this education, Dr. Elkabets had published research results in leading cancer journals and attracted international interest. He chose BGU among many offers and joined the Shraga Segal Department of Microbiology, Immunology and Genetics in the Faculty of Health Sciences in 2015. The lab he set up investigates head, neck and gynecological cancer, which can be similar in causes and therapies. His focus: precision medicine driven by genomics. "We try to understand the correlation between the cancer's mutation profile and specific therapies to improve treatment."

Moshe Elkabets' long path to his chosen work was supported by ISEF. He had grown up in Ofakim, a development town in southern Israel and historically an immigrant community. His father came from Morocco at age 11, and his mother's family was from Egypt.

"We worked hard, always," he says of his four siblings and parents. "But making ends meet was difficult." Furthermore, the town's absence of cultural opportunities limited his early education. He spent three years in an army engineering unit and then worked to save for university. In 2005, looking toward a Ph.D., he was awarded an ISEF scholarship.

"ISEF gave me not just financial support all the way through my postdoc, but inspiration. They believed in me—that I can do well." He values the ISEF meetings held every two weeks when he was studying in Israel,

and in the U.S., the periodic meetings with other postdocs to talk and share experiences.

"Now I raise funds for ISEF, talk to students about it, and with time, will be even more involved—absolutely. ISEF stays with me. It's deep inside me. Once you are ISEF you remain ISEF"

Today, Dr. Elkabets, his wife, Keren, and three children live on a Negev kibbutz. Pursuing his research in the south where members of his family also still live has special meaning for him. "There are more than a half-million people here but there's a lack of research and I think that negatively affects their treatment as patients. We have different populations and some types of cancer are unique to the region but haven't been investigated."

Two current projects particularly excite him. One investigates ovarian cancer for which no current treatment exists. "We're able to describe the pathway activated for patients with a specific mutation, which is present in about 20 percent of cases. We believe there is a chance to use a very potent drug combination for patients with that mutation." While a cure is not on the horizon, he hopes the treatment will induce a stable or chronic disease situation rather than a lethal one. A global pharmaceutical company is working with the lab.

The second project relates to head and neck cancer. His team is studying a biomarker (a cancer indicator) that predicts how a patient will respond to an approved, widely used medication. After working with a patient who showed a strong resistance to it, the team is investigating whether the discovery proves out with a larger group.

"When we understand the molecular mechanisms that distinguish patients who respond and don't respond to a treatment, we can tailor it better, and hopefully propose a better one."

Dr. Moshe Elkabets, former BGU student turned rising star BGU faculty member and researcher, is just one of the many successful alumni whose studies were supported by ISEF. The whole AABGU/BGU family salutes ISEF on their 40th anniversary.

