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Doctor Disputes Winners of Nobel in Medicine

By Nicholas Wade

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An inventor who feels he was unfairly excluded has mounted an unusual and vigorous protest against the award this year of the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

The inventor, Dr. Raymond V. Damadian, president of the Fonar Corporation in Melville, N.Y., took a first step toward the development of M.R.I., or magnetic resonance imaging, a now widespread medical technique for imaging the body without the use of radiation. But the Nobel Prize in Medicine was given this week to two others, Dr. Paul C. Lauterbur of the University of Illinois and Sir Peter Mansfield of the University of Nottingham in England.

The Nobel Prize committee committed ''a shameful wrong that must be righted,'' according to a full-page advertisement taken out in this newspaper yesterday by the Fonar Corporation. A similar ad appeared earlier in The Washington Post. Ads of this size in The New York Times generally cost around $100,000, and in the Post about $80,000.

Dr. Damadian holds a basic patent on the technique, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1997, and which the General Electric Company was ordered to pay $129 million for infringing, Dr. Damadian said in an interview. He has also received the National Medal of Technology and an award for inventors, the Lemelson Prize from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

He said he would have been willing to share the prize but felt it was unfair to have been excluded, especially because historians and textbook writers tend to follow the Nobel committees' verdicts. ''I have hoped for 30 years of my life for some moment of vindication,'' Dr. Damadian said. ''To wake up on Monday morning and see that I had been written out of history is an agony I cannot live with.''

Dr. Hans Ringertz, the chairman of the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute, which awards the prize established by Alfred Nobel's will, said the Swedish assembly stood by its decision. ''We have had world experts evaluating this issue for years and this has been our final conclusion,'' Dr. Ringertz said.

The issue has been the subject of a dispute between Dr. Damadian and Dr. Lauterbur and has been known for years in academic circles, with some fearing that the Nobel committee would steer clear of magnetic resonance imaging altogether because of the Swedes' supposed distaste for controversial discoveries.

Dr. Lauterbur, 74, is not in good health, and the committee may have decided that its prize, which cannot be given posthumously, needed to be awarded for the discovery now or never.

The prestigious awards are disputed with some regularity, notably when those who have made acknowledged contributions to a discovery find their names are not included in the three-winner maximum allowed by Nobel's will

The M.R.I. case is unusual because the omission of Dr. Damadian, when there were only two winners, is seen by him and others as a pointed oversight. Also, his contribution, though one in a series of advances required to make M.R.I. machines a reality, has been widely acknowledged outside of the academic community.

In the academic community, including the circles whose advice probably reached the Nobel committee, some experts believe that the conceptual work required to make the discovery a practical reality was undertaken by Dr. Lauterbur and others, and that Dr. Damadian's contribution was less significant.

It is also the case that Dr. Damadian, who sees himself as an outsider, has sometimes flouted the behavioral norms of the scientific community, as when he held a news conference in 1977 at which he announced his new M.R.I. machine could detect cancer anywhere in the human body. Even today, M.R.I. machines are usually used to delineate cancers detected by other means.

It took a series of steps to make the machines practical. Essentially, Dr. Damadian and his supporters, backed by the patent courts, view the first of those steps, which he took, as being of critical importance, a view not shared by the Nobel committee and many academic experts.

''If you could take a poll of the research community, they would come out very seriously in agreement with the Nobel committee,'' said Dr. Charles Springer, an M.R.I. expert at the Oregon Health and Science University.

Dr. Damadian ''made an important observation that set people thinking about moving N.M.R. to medicine,'' Dr. Springer said, referring to nuclear magnetic resonance, the basic technique that underlies M.R.I. machines. Until 1970, the technique had been used only by chemists and physicists.

Dr. Damadian's idea was to look at N.M.R. signals from excised lumps of tissue to see if they were cancerous. But it was Dr. Lauterbur, Dr. Springer said, who showed how to use the signal to generate an image of the body.