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INVENTORS OF THE YEAR WINNERS AWARDED BY EPO

Concluding a very exciting run-up which started earlier this year, the European Patent Office (EPO) just announced the winners for the 2014 European inventor of the year award. The award ceremony was held on June 17, 2014 in Berlin, and was attended by some 500 guests from the fields of business, science, culture and politics.

Every year, the EPO grants various awards for outstanding inventorship achievements. These awards are granted to various categories of inventors, namely large European companies, SMEs, research at university and research institutes. The EPO also awards a prize for long-term contribution of individual European inventors by way of the "Lifetime Achievement" award. Last but not least, inventions by entities which are not European nationals but who hold a European patent are awarded a prize as well.

This year's industry winner are Mr. Andries of Belgium, Mr. Guillemont of France and their team, which was awarded the prize for their efforts in developing the first new effective tuberculosis drug in 4 decades. Thanks to this research team, tuberculosis can now be treated successfully. Their innovative drug cuts off the energy supply in tuberculosis bacteria, thereby significantly lowering treatment times and allowing for a full recovery.

As regards SMEs, this year's winner is a Danish company called Aquaporin. The prize is for their inventions in the field of energy-efficient water purification. In particular, their invention lies in a water-purifying membrane coated with aquaporins, which can purify water by consuming only small amounts of energy. The innovation is based on the natural filtering ability of so-called aquaporins which, contrary to conventional methods, allows to avoid elaborate filtration systems typically based on energy- and cost-intensive hydrostatic pressure.

In the area of research institutes, the this year's winner is Mr. Toumazou of the United Kingdom. Mr. Toumazou's winning invention is a quick DNA test which is able to decipher the genetic makeup of individuals literally within minutes, without the need for lab work. The novelty lies in a microchip that is able to detect deviations in an individual human genome; the chip can be inserted into a USB stick, thereby providing results which can be viewed directly on a computer.

The non-European winner is Mr. Hull of the US. Mr. Hull's prize is for his invention of 3D printing - a technology which is presently used in several fields and which has sparked a true revolution in manufacturing. Even though many different procedures for 3D printing now exist, all of them build on Mr. Hull's original invention.

Finally, the winner in the area of lifetime achievement is Mr. Fischer of Germany. Mr. Fischer is named as inventor on more than 1,100 applications for patents and utility models, which makes him one of the most prolific inventors ever. In particular, his invention of the expansion plug (named after him and this called "Fischer wall plug") completely revolutionised construction industry in the 1950's and has been used billions of times since then. Other inventions for which he had gained global recognition are the first synchronised photo flash for cameras as well as his "fischertechnik" toy building sets.

When giving out the inventor of the year award, the EPO considers the importance of each invention from various points of view, including the social and economic benefit of the invention. In fact, through this award the EPO tries to identify inventors whose contribution is both technical and scientific as well as significant in the broader sense. It seems that in 2014 too the EPO was able to find inventors whose groundbreaking research and innovations have changed science, industry and life in general for the better.