

PRESS RELEASE

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THE WILHELM SANDER FOUNDATION IS FUNDING SIXTEEN NEW CANCER RESEARCH PROJECTS WITH OVER 2.8 MILLION EUROS

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In the third quarter of 2026, the Wilhelm Sander Foundation approved funding for 16 research projects totalling 2,824,168 euros. These range from the targeted induction of ferroptosis in pancreatic cancer, through new immunotherapies for leukaemias and lymphomas, to gentler radiotherapy techniques. Funding is being provided for projects that fundamentally elucidate the mechanisms underlying cancer development and resistance to treatment, and which use these findings to derive new diagnostic and therapeutic approaches.

“What is striking this time is that several projects are focusing on the pancreas – a tumour for which we urgently need better treatment options. However, the decision was based solely on scientific merit,” explains Maximilian Habersetzer, Head of Grants at the Wilhelm Sander Foundation.

The Foundation’s Scientific Advisory Board decides on funding through a multi-stage peer review process based solely on scientific quality; there are no thematic quotas.

Overview of the research projects funded by the Wilhelm Sander Foundation in the third quarter of 2026 (listed by cancer type or organ):

PANCREATIC CANCER

Prof. Dr. Dieter Saur | Technical University of Munich (TUM)
“Mechanistic Basis and Therapeutic Potential of Ferroptosis Induction Following KRAS Inhibition in Pancreatic Ductal Adenocarcinoma (PDAC)”

What it’s all about: Pancreatic cancer is usually driven by mutations in the KRAS gene. The project investigates whether tumour cells can be specifically destroyed and relapses prevented by means of a staggered strategy: first inhibiting KRAS, then triggering ferroptosis.

Dr. Kivanc Görgülü | Technical University of Munich (TUM)
“Repurposing FDA-Approved Drugs Targeting p62/SQSTM1 for Novel Pancreatic Cancer Interventions”

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What it's all about: Pancreatic cancer is particularly deadly, and existing autophagy inhibitors have only limited efficacy. The project investigates how the active substance darapladib triggers a specific form of cell death (ferroptosis) in tumour cells via the protein p62, and tests combinations with established therapies.

Dr. Robert Wodtke | Helmholtz Centre Dresden-Rossendorf

"Development of ^{133/135}La-labelled spermine conjugates for radionuclide theranostics in pancreatic cancer"

What it's all about: Tumour cells take up polyamines at an increased rate. The project utilises this to simultaneously visualise and specifically target pancreatic cancer using radioactively labelled spermine derivatives.

Prof. Dr. Shiv Singh | University Medical Centre Göttingen (UMG)

"Integrative mapping of epigenetic programmes driving cellular plasticity and therapy response in pancreatic cancer"

What it's all about: Ductal pancreatic carcinoma occurs in two subtypes of varying aggressiveness, and during treatment a tumour can change its subtype, often with a poorer prognosis. Prof. Dr Singh is investigating the role played by epigenetic regulators (HDAC complexes) in this process, with a view to identifying targets for more precise therapies.

BLOOD CANCER

Dr. Mirco Friedrich | German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ)

"Reprogramming of Regulatory T Cells as a Key Modulator of Response to Bispecific T-Cell Engagers in Haematological Malignancies"

What it's all about: Bispecific T-cell engagers have transformed the treatment of multiple myeloma, but resistance remains a problem. The project investigates how these therapies reprogramme regulatory T cells into cytotoxic 'exTregs', and aims to develop biomarkers and strategies to overcome resistance based on these findings.

Dr. Martina Seiffert | German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ)

'Enhancing Dendritic Cell Function to Improve Immunotherapy in Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia'

What it's all about: In chronic lymphocytic leukaemia, the enzyme IL411 suppresses the body's own immune defences. The project is investigating its role and examining whether the immune response can be restored using IL411 inhibitors in combination with bispecific antibodies.

BREAST CANCER

Dr Kerstin Menck | University of Münster

'Identification of new regulators of the biogenesis of large extracellular vesicles with implications for tumour progression'

What it's all about: Tumour cells communicate with their surroundings via small vesicles known as extracellular vesicles. Dr Menck has shown that motor proteins (kinesins) control which tumour proteins enter large vesicles. The follow-up project is investigating how these vesicles form, with a view to specifically disrupting communication between cancer cells in the future.

COLON AND STOMACH CANCER

PD Dr. Andrey Pravdivtsev | University Medical Centre Schleswig-Holstein (UKSH)
"DMI Tracking: Non-invasive Metabolic Imaging for Precision Medicine"

What it's all about: Chronic inflammatory bowel diseases are associated with an increased risk of bowel cancer, but until now the critical transition has only been detectable through invasive procedures. The project aims to use a new, non-invasive metabolic imaging technique (DMI) to identify early warning signs, thereby enabling more personalised treatment.

BRAIN TUMOURS

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schmid | Technical University of Munich (TUM)

'Neurobehavioural and Structural Effects of Minibeam Radiation Therapy (MBRT) on the Normal Brain: Preclinical Assessment for Clinical Translation'

What it's all about: Minibeam radiation therapy targets brain tumours with fine, parallel X-ray beams and may be better at sparing healthy brain tissue. The project is using mice to investigate whether such high doses can be administered without causing permanent damage, thereby paving the way for clinical trials.

LIVER AND BILE DUCT CANCER

PhD Paul Ginno | German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ)

"Damage CONTROL: From DNA lesions to carcinogenesis"

What it's all about: Despite decades of genomic research, it remains unclear how short-term DNA damage caused by carcinogens leads to the permanent mutations found in liver tumours. To address this, the project is developing a new sequencing method called 'Damage CONTROL-seq', which can be used to trace the pathway

from DNA damage to tumour formation. The method could also provide biomarkers for carcinogen exposure and DNA repair.

Dr. Marcus Conrad | Helmholtz Zentrum München

'Identifying context-specific FSP1 dependencies in hepatocellular carcinoma'

What it's all about: The protein FSP1 protects cells from ferroptosis, a specific form of cell death, and inhibiting it slows tumour growth in various tumour types. Its role in hepatocellular carcinoma is poorly understood. The project uses an animal model to elucidate how FSP1 influences tumour development, with a view to deriving therapeutic strategies.

LUNG CANCER

Prof. Dr. Rajkumar Savai | Justus Liebig University Giessen

"Mitochondrial Ribosomal Proteins (MRPs) and Mitochondrial Transfer in Lung Cancer Tumourigenesis"

What it's all about: In lung cancer, certain mitochondrial proteins such as MRPL35 are present in increased quantities and are associated with a poorer prognosis. Prof. Dr. Savai's project is investigating the role these proteins play in tumour growth and metastasis.

PROSTATE CANCER

Prof. Dr. Susanne Kossatz | Technical University of Munich (TUM)

"A Next-Generation Approach to Optimising Hormone Therapy in Prostate Cancer"

What it's all about: Hormone therapy plays a central role in the treatment of advanced prostate cancer, but it has severe side effects because the active substances do not reach the tumour exclusively. Prof. Dr. Kossatz is developing devices that deliver hormone-active substances specifically to the tumour whilst sparing healthy organs. She is testing these in cell and animal models, including in combination with established therapies.

RARE TUMOURS

Dr. Oliver Klein | Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin

"Multi-omics technologies for the molecular characterisation of thymomas and thymic carcinomas to improve diagnosis and prognosis"

What it's all about: Thymic epithelial tumours are rare and still poorly understood at the molecular level. Using imaging mass spectrometry and proteome analyses on

two well-documented patient cohorts, the project is investigating sugar structures (N-glycans) and the tumour microenvironment. The aim is to identify new diagnostic and prognostic signatures to improve prognosis and personalised treatment.

IMMUNOTHERAPY

Prof. Dr Sebastian Kobold | Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU)
'Interleukin-22 receptor-modified chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cells for tumour therapy'

What it's all about: Cellular therapies have so far had only limited efficacy against solid tumours. The project equips T-cells with a receptor for IL-22, a growth signal produced by the tumour itself, so that they can utilise this signal to remain active and effective within the tumour for longer.

RADIOTHERAPY

Prof. Dr Verena Jendrossek | Essen University Hospital
"Translational studies to validate the personalisation of proton beam therapy through PARP inhibition in preclinical models"

What it's all about: Proton beam therapy delivers the radiation dose more precisely than conventional radiotherapy. Prof. Dr Jendrossek has shown that, following proton irradiation, tumour cells rely on an alternative repair pathway for DNA breaks, and this represents a potential vulnerability. The project is investigating, in preclinical models, whether the effects of the radiation can be specifically enhanced by PARP inhibitors.

* The gender-neutral terms used in this text encompass all genders.

Wilhelm Sander Foundation: Research. Knowledge. Future.

The purpose of the foundation is to promote medical research, in particular projects relating to the fight against cancer. Since the foundation was established, a total of over 360 million euros has been awarded to around 2,700 research projects in Germany and Switzerland. This makes the Wilhelm Sander Foundation one of the most significant private research foundations in the German-speaking world. It was established from the estate of the entrepreneur of the same name, who died in 1973.

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