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## DR. IGOR STAGLJAR'S SCHOOL OF SCIENCE

THIS IMMIGRANT SCIENTIST IS TAKING  
HIS SPOT IN CANADIAN ACADEMIA

CANADIAN IMMIGRANT'S POST-SECONDARY GUIDE

7-POINT BACK-TO-SCHOOL CHECKLIST

4 STRATEGIES FOR  
CAREER CONFIDENCE

**4 | OUR TAKE/YOUR TAKE****6 | FUSION**

> People, news, events

**30 | CULTURE**

> Alberto Tihan's acting success  
> Filmmaker Kathi Selvakumar

**32 | CAREERS**

> Diversity at work  
> SOCIAL NETWORKING:  
Link to a job  
> SKILLS FOR SUCCESS: 4  
confidence strategies  
> BUILDING YOUR BRAND:  
Embrace your environment

**36 | RELOCATION**

> Alberta is calling

**38 | MONEY**

> MONEY MATTERS: Investing  
a small sum  
> MY TWO CENTS: 5 ways to  
stop spending

**40 | EDUCATION**

> Kids' back-to-school traditions

**41 | LIVING**

> MAYANK'S IMMIGRANT  
ADVENTURES: Missing home  
> CARS: Age versus mileage

**43 | SETTLEMENT**

> IMMIGRATION LAW:  
Shift taking place

**46 | LAST WORD**

> A place to call home

**14 | WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT: NEW SERIES**

> Getting the employers' perspective, starting with  
Deloitte Canada's chief talent officer

**17 | CANADIAN IMMIGRANT'S POST-SECONDARY GUIDE (PART 1)**

> 7-point checklist, bridging programs, student  
stress, going into trades and more ...

COVER STORY | 10

# Diverse science

Croatian-born Dr.  
Igor Stagljär is a top  
molecular biologist  
researcher in Canada

Cover photo by Saajid Morla



# SPORTY SCIENTIST

Croatian-born molecular biologist Igor Stagljär works hard and plays hard in Canada

BY GLORIA SUHASINI

PHOTOS BY SAAJID MOTALA

Imagine a scientist who works up to 12 hours a day in a lab — you might picture a bespectacled, grey-haired, mild-mannered person wearing a white lab coat over a suit and tie, sitting alone, peering into a microscope. But Professor Igor Stagljär is no stereotypical scientist. In fact, entering his office at the University of Toronto's Donnelly Centre, you find the six-foot-six, youthful and athletic-built Stagljär in a pair of shorts and a casual shirt, sitting in front of his laptop, reading up on the latest news in his field — molecular genetics.

Even his office furnishings are in sync with his personality — modern and vibrant.

“In North America, it's hard to find a stereotypical, geeky scientist in a white lab coat, isolated in a windowless basement lab, strictly following the rules of the lab books, until he finally makes the planned discovery,” says Croatian-born Stagljär with a laugh. “A scientist who has no collaborators, who does not know how to communicate with the outside world, who does not respect diversity ... this really does

not correspond to reality these days anymore.”

Stagljar’s active participation in team sports throughout his life helped him understand the importance of teamwork in all areas of his life and break away from the traditional researcher profile — he was part of the national U-18 junior handball team for the former Yugoslavia.

“Participation in sports has made me a strong person. It taught me to go for it and never surrender. Today’s kids often say, ‘I don’t know how to do it.’ I say, just do it ... work hard! And if you are into sports, it’s much easier to go through difficult situations.”

But how did he get interested in pursuing sciences and not sports? “As a teenager, my wish was to become a medical doctor. Despite the fact that I was accepted to the medical school in Croatia, I decided at the last moment to switch to study human biology with the specialization in molecular biology,” he recalls. “I realized at that time that in the past 10 years the Nobel awards for medicine were mainly given to molecular biologists.”

Though Stagljjar notes that his primary goal as a scientist is not to win awards, he found that molecular biologists were doing great things for medicine to treat cancer and other major diseases. “We first need to understand what molecules in our cells, when faulty, cause cancer, and how we can repair or destroy these faulty molecules with a specific drug. Its interdisciplinary aspect was the main reason why I decided to become a molecular biologist.”

While that defined his career path, the 45-year-old scientist strongly believes that “thinking outside the lab” is a key part in his happiness and wellbeing. “Although I adore science and work long hours, I think there must be a proper and healthy balance in everyone’s life. In my case, it is sports, making wine, listening to music and spending quality time with people I love.

“I’m simply doing the things that make me happy and when I’m doing them, I do them with great love and passion.” And Canada has provided him the opportunity to play hard and work hard, just the way he loves it.

In comparison, remembering the 16 years he spent in Switzerland before immigrating to Canada seven years ago, Stagljjar says he was unhappy about his career development as an assistant professor at the University of Zurich. “Imagine building a pioneering spaceship, but you couldn’t launch it into space because you didn’t have access to the precious fuel,” he explains. “This is exactly what was happening to me in Zurich ... it was very difficult to reach for your ideal career goals if you were young, driven and non-Swiss.”

As luck would have it, in 2004, Stagljjar met faculty members from the University of Toronto at a conference in the United States, where he gave a presentation on his research work. Impressed with his work in progress, and being on a mission to attract young and promising professors to their research centre in Canada, they invited him to join their faculty. “I got a job offer that scientists in my age get only once during their lifetime, an offer that I simply could not turn down.” And the rest is history.

Stagljar is quick to add that aside from this great offer, there were other reasons why he and his family chose Canada. While he says the University of Toronto is one of the best in the world in the field of biomedical research, his future lab was situated in one of the top-notch research centres in the world. “Most importantly, I was always fascinated by Canadian multiculturalism, its comfortable lifestyle and safety — all these were



major reasons why I chose U of T and Canada to continue my research career and as a place to live," he concedes.

But is it a permanent move for

cannot build a first-class soccer team or basketball team [without funding]. In order to build a good team, you have to invest money."

His anxiety about funding

any other personal characteristic. In my opinion, this diversity and recruitment of the best scientists all around the world is one of the keys to University of Toronto's

from China most probably all have quite different perspectives on the world, and our science highly benefits from such diversity because they will



“ Science has always been and will be an international endeavour, open to anyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religious commitment or any other personal characteristic.”

this globetrotting, much sought-after scientist? That's his hope and plan — he recently passed the qualifying written test in the citizenship process — but is a bit apprehensive about the future of scientific development in Canada, in terms of funding.

"If, for example, the Canadian government would decide to cut back the funding of research, I'd be forced to leave because my team and I still have so many ideas that we want to pursue. One interesting aspect of being a successful scientist is that you can be recruited by and work in any great university in the world.

"My greatest fear is that we will run into the same problems like the Americans ... look what's happening now: the U.S. is slowly but surely losing its prestige as a world power in science. I think we are taking over, but, in the last two years, the level of funding is the same, if not less. It's making me a little bit worried. I hope we are not going to repeat the same mistake the Americans did," he says, stressing the importance of funding science. "It's amazing to see what kind of progress Canada has made in the last 20 years. It's all due to tremendous investments. You

is understandable, as his own laboratory uses more than \$1 million worth of equipment, such as state-of-the-art robots. And the lab's needs are growing with its scientific progress. "My laboratory tries to understand how certain proteins in our body contribute to diseases such as cancer, cystic fibrosis and some neurodegenerative disorders at a molecular level," Stagljär explains his team's research work.

While he is critical of the federal government's tight fist in funding, he is happy that immigration rules have been relaxed for postdoctoral scholars. "When we talk about recruiting the best scientists to Canada, the rules are a bit less strict now and I think this is crucial if we want to continue to be one of the strongest and most attractive countries in the world of science and technology. Without scientists, mathematicians, researchers and engineers, the scientific discoveries that drive innovation in Canada will not be possible."

Stagljär works with several scientists from around the world in his lab in Toronto. "Science has always been and will be an international endeavour, open to anyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religious commitment or

rapid rate of progress in the past 20 years. I really enjoy leading my U of T team of young researchers who originate from eight different countries. They all bring many points of view to bear on and have different strengths and interests in scientific problems that we study in my lab."

He goes on to say, "For example, the 24-year-old graduate student from Canada, the 30-year-old postdoctoral fellow from Austria, and the 35-year-old research associate

approach scientific problems in a variety of creative ways. My take-home message is that science definitely depends on diversity — if scientists were all the same, scientific controversy would be rare, but so would be scientific progress!"

The enthusiastic molecular biologist is certainly a force in Canada's scientific progress. Who knows, one day he could become a Noble laureate, showing that immigrant scientists can make the country proud! 🌸