Nobel laureate shares science and diplomacy at Tulane

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Dee Boling dboling@tulane.edu

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Nobel laureate Dr. Peter Agre (left) with Samendra Sherchan, PhD, global environmental health sciences faculty (right).

Nobel laureate Dr. Peter Agre recently shared both scientific discovery and the concept of science diplomacy during two lectures on the downtown campus.

Agre, director of the Johns Hopkins Malaria Research Institute, was the guest of Tulane's Department of Tropical Medicine. He has worked with Dr. Nirbhay Kumar, professor of tropical medicine, on malaria research.

The more scientific of his presentations focused on his almost accidental discovery of aquaporins, which are like the "plumbing system" of cells, integral water channels that exist in all plant and animal life. These water channels are critical in areas like kidney function.

It was his discovery of aquaporins that led him to receive the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2003.

In recent years, Agre's career has shifted from intensive work in the lab to his current passion: scientific diplomacy. This intriguing area was the focus of another talk he gave at Tulane.

In 2009, Agre became president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and in that role he began to promote scientific collaboration on a world stage. As something of a scientific ambassador, he has traveled to countries like Cuba, Iran, Myanmar (Burma), and North Korea, where he's been able to open dialogue with scientists in countries that remain largely closed off to the rest of the world.

His talk in the Diboll Auditorium included images of meetings with high-ranking science officials in North Korea, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi in Iran, and Fidel Castro in Cuba. With the belief that “some contact is better than no contact,” he has used his celebrity as a Nobel laureate to open the door to scientific exchange and collaboration.

“In many cases, these governments are very supportive of science,” he said. He pointed to data that even in countries where citizens don’t have a favorable view of the United States, they often have a very favorable view of American science and innovation.

He recognizes that he is in a unique position to make this type of connection happen. Science diplomacy “is something you do once you’ve gained visibility,” he said, although it’s something graduate students are often very drawn to.

In both presentations, Agre highlighted how science – good science – is not a solitary pursuit conducted in a vacuum. He demonstrated how his scientific achievement was a collective effort with the assistance of teams of diverse scientists from all over the world, and how even casual conversations with colleagues often lead to new ways of looking at his work in the lab.

“I have an interest in clinical medicine, an interest in science, and a reverence for the importance of public health,” he said at the close of an interview. “I do what I can. I don’t think I’m a leader, just another enthusiast.”