

Internationally Recognized Cell Biologist at UCSD Dies

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Kim McDonald

John W. Newport, an internationally recognized cell biologist and a professor of biology at the University of California, San Diego, died of pancreatic cancer on December 26 in Del Mar. He was 54.

Newport was a faculty member at UCSD for 22 years, joining the university as an assistant professor of biology in 1983. He is noted for his discoveries about how proteins in the cell regulate the timing of early developmental events, including how a single protein regulates cell division in all organisms. He also elucidated the mechanisms by which cells assemble and disassemble the nucleus, the compartment that holds an organism's genetic instructions, and published numerous articles about his discoveries in *Science*, *Cell* and other prestigious scientific journals.

"He was a highly distinguished, internationally recognized scientist who, over his career, made numerous seminal discoveries elucidating the mechanisms by which cells divide," said Richard A. Firtel, professor and chair of cell and developmental biology at UCSD.

"John had a major impact on cell biology and his contributions on the control of cell cycles will be cited for decades to come," said William J. McGinnis, a professor of biology and a close colleague.

Newport was born October 30, 1951 in Redwood City, CA, and graduated from Reed College with a degree in biology in 1975. He received his doctorate in chemistry at the University of Oregon in 1979 and spent the following four years as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, San Francisco, where he began his investigations of the basic processes of the cell.

Marc Kirschner, chair of the Systems Biology Department at the Harvard Medical School, who oversaw Newport's research at UC San Francisco, recalled that Newport's chemistry training early on provided him with a different perspective how to tackle complex biological problems.

"You could see his physical chemist's mind at work, the way he approached complex biological problems very mechanistically," Kirschner said. "He was a very deep thinking conceptual person who was not afraid to tackle complex problems. And what was remarkable about John was that he could come up with simple ways, simple experiments, to tackle some of the most complex biological problems."

Colleagues at UCSD agreed, noting that he was widely admired among the faculty for his innovative and imaginative approach to answering scientific problems.

"He was known as an innovator, someone who had the ability and foresight to think of questions and approaches to problems that no one had ever considered," said Douglass Jane Forbes, a professor of biology at UCSD who also started her career in Kirschner's laboratory. She worked with Newport in the mid-1980s at UCSD to demonstrate that a cell's nucleus could be chemically assembled and disassembled in a test tube.

"No one ever thought that you could do this in a test tube, which was what these two accomplished together," said Kirschner.

Those accomplishments and others led the National Institutes of Health to award Newport in 2000 with a 10-year merit grant, an honor given to only the highest performing scientists funded by the agency, and to his election in 2001 to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Kirschner said one notable quality about Newport's approach to science was that he was a trailblazer, seeking to solve questions no one else had considered. "He became less interested if he knew half the field was working on the same problems," Kirschner said. "He was always looking for things no one else had touched."

During the last several years of his life, Newport had been working on the genetic basis of sleep and sleep disorders, an area that few biologists had probed.

"John was also an incredibly creative scientist, with the rare combination of confidence and modesty," said McGinnis. "He was almost invariably right, but he didn't browbeat his colleagues until they believed him. He let his data speak for him."

At UCSD, Newport made contributions to improve the quality of academic life. "John used his leadership ability to raise the quality of science and academic life at UCSD," said Firtel. "During the past year, he was chair of the university's committee on academic promotions, a position of major importance to the campus faculty and the overall well-being of the campus."

He was also active in the Del Mar community, frequently volunteering at his son's and daughter's schools and personally sponsoring a recreational soccer team in the area whose jerseys bore the advertisement "UCSD Biology."

He is survived by his former spouse, Douglass Jane Forbes of Del Mar; their two children, Katherine and Joshua of Del Mar; a brother, James Newport of Del Mar and Las Vegas; and a sister, Julie Newport of Hong Kong.

A memorial service for Newport will take place on the UCSD campus on Friday, February 3 at 4 p.m. at the Ida and Cecil Green Faculty Club. His family requests that in lieu of flowers donations be made to Torrey Pines High School Foundation or the Earl Warren Middle School Science Department.

Donations to the Torrey Pines Foundation can be made at <http://torreypinesfoundation.org/> (Please indicate that they are for Student Success Services and are in memory of John Newport).

Donations to the Earl Warren Science Department should be made by check to SDUHSD (on memo line write Earl Warren Science Department in honor of John Newport). Checks should be mailed to San Dieguito Union High School District, c/o Dr. Peggy Lynch, 710 Encinitas Blvd., Encinitas, CA 92024.

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