

Michael Yaffe named 1986 Searle Scholar by Chicago Community Trust

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Michael P. Yaffe, an assistant professor of biology at the University of California, San Diego, is one of 18 scientists who has been named a 1986 Searle Scholar by the Chicago Community Trust.

"This is a nationwide award and limited in number, so it is a particular honor for the department to have our fourth Searle Scholar," Herbert Stern, chairman of the Department of Biology, said. "The number of Searle Scholars at UCSD is especially impressive when you consider that the program was established in 1981."

The purpose of the prestigious award is to support the research of outstanding assistant professors embarking on careers in medicine, chemistry and biological science. Each Searle Scholar receives \$180,000 in funds, which are distributed over a three-year period.

Yaffe said his grant will support research on two important structures within a cell that are essential for its growth and function. The subcellular structures that primarily interest him are the cell nucleus, where the cell's DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid)--its molecular blueprints--are maintained and replicated, and the mitochondria--the cell's power plants, where chemical energy is generated.

Basically, he is trying to understand precisely how a cell replicates all its structures as it grows and divides.

"Our interest is in how these structures are assembled, particularly--a major component of that assembly--the transport of proteins into these structures during cell growth. Another focus of our research is on the role of these structures in cell activity," Yaffe said.

"One of our long-term goals is to understand on a fundamental level cell growth and differentiation in both normal and diseased cells, such as cancer cells or cells with genetic defects. Our work could help uncover the molecular basis of abnormalities in cell function or structure which underlie different pathological states," he said.

Yaffe works with baker's yeast, a model cellular system which is particularly suited for both genetic and molecular studies.

"The Searle Award enables us to broaden our basic investigation--to make it more comprehensive and to address important and unanswered questions, things we would be unable to do without the additional support," he said.

Yaffe received his bachelor's degree in 1975 from UC Davis and his Ph.D. in 1982 from the Harvard Medical School's Department of Biological Chemistry. He was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Basel in Switzerland prior to joining the biology department at UCSD in 1985.

Previously named Searle Scholars at UCSD are John W. Newport, Suresh Subramani and Jean Y.J. Wang. All are assistant professors of biology.

The program is supported by funds from trusts established under the wills of John G. and Frances C. Searle. John Searle was president of G.D. Searle & Co., one of the nation's major pharmaceutical companies. He died in 1978.

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