Chair’s Message

Warm enough? As summer intensifies and thoughts of vacation time gain prominence, I must remind all that in spite of our having survived the ravages of Ike and now received assurances that September will bring State support to our reconstruction process, there remain two things that will not go away and must be dealt with. Yes, we must once more, unless you are one of the few very diligent, complete our compliance online testing. This need not be a horrendous task as much of it is simple common sense and, yes, I know some of it is not. However, before August 31, each UTMB employee must “do compliance”. The other not so pleasant rite of summer is hurricane preparation of our labs. Make sure you have the necessary supplies, you have discussed with your research group who will do what, and provide us with a list of freezers and their location that we may be able to monitor them in the event of power failure. Decide who needs to get an orange “pass” unto the Island in the event of a storm – remember that students do not qualify for this duty. It might not be a bad idea to review your personal emergency plans and make sure you have necessary supplies, plans and cash. Yes, without electricity credit cards are non-functional.

We are all happy that the Shriners will reopen and it seems that the major bureaucratic hurdles have been overcome. The fall season should be a busy one on campus as the funds obtained are put to work.

This summer, three of our esteemed colleagues: Wayne Bolen, Lillian Chan, and Brad Thompson will be appointed Emeritus Professors. While the status of retired faculty has been well earned and we all wish them a more tranquil existence, I am sure they will remain on campus either carrying out some research project or more likely providing guidance to colleagues. Nevertheless, it certainly has been my privilege to work in various capacities with all three and I look forward to a more leisurely pace for them.

So, make your preparations and enjoy the rest of the summer. If you are planning to submit a grant in early fall and would like editorial assistance, please remember as of September David Konkel will be half time BMB and half time Institute for Translational Science Editorial Core. His time is precious as always and this means you must plan ahead if you are to benefit from his expertise.

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Awards and Announcements

Rebecca Alyea, recent graduate of Dr. Cheryl Watson’s Lab was recently chosen a winner in the Dr. and Mrs. Seymour Fisher Academic Excellence Awards in the Neuroscience competition. She was the sole winner in the Ph.D. category for her paper entitled The roles of membrane estrogen receptor subtypes in modulating dopamine transporters in PC-12 cells. She will return to UTMB on July 22nd to present a talk based on this work and receive her award. The paper for which she won this award is: RA Alyea, SE Laurence, SH Kim, BS Katzenellenbogen, JA Katzenellenbogen, CS Watson  The roles of membrane estrogen receptor subtypes in modulating dopamine transporters in PC-12 cells. J. Neurochemistry, 106(4):1525-33, 2008.

Grants

Dr. Junji Iwahara’s proposal entitled “NMR Study of Kinetics of Protein / Cellulose Interactions” was funded by American Chemical Society Petroleum Research Fund. The award is $100,000 for a two-year period from January 1, 2010.

Party on the Beach!

The BCSO Annual Summer BBQ Party is scheduled at the San Luis Beach. Chefs Christof Straub, Austin Elam, and Debashish Sahu will tantalize your taste buds with their famous “BCSO Grilled Hot Dogs and Hamburgers” accompanied with “BCSO Grilled Veggies and Portobello Mushrooms.”

Come talk shop with some old faces and meet new faces. What could be better than sitting at the beach with great people, a cold beer, good food, and good music!

Event: BCSO Summer BBQ Beach Party
Time: Saturday July 18th / 6:30pm
Place: San Luis Beach
RSVP by Friday July 17th / 5:00pm to desahu@utmb.edu
Graduate Program News

After 8 years as Program Director, Dr. Lillian Chan is retiring. Through Dr. Chan's leadership, dedication and vision have made our graduate program what it is today. To honor Dr. Chan's contributions, an endowment has been established in her name. The Lee-Nien Chan Endowment Fund will be used to further the educational and research activities of our graduate students and promote their career development. As we embark on a new phase of leadership for the program, we will continue to build on Dr. Chan's legacy. For more details from Dr. Chan's retirement party, please see the article on page 4. For more information regarding the endowment, please see the link on the BMB Program website:

Congratulations to Abhisek Mukherjee, Soto laboratory, for receiving the NCDDN Fellowship in Drug Discovery offered through the Laboratory for Drug Discovery in Neurodegeneration/ National Center for Drug Discovery in Neurodegeneration, Brigham and Women's Hospital and the Harvard Neuro Discovery Center. This highly competitive and exciting opportunity will allow him to live and work at Harvard for one year starting this September.

Keerthi Gottipati, Choi laboratory, sent us this information which may be of great help to our students who are nearly the completion of their education and looking for future employment.

BestPlacesToWorkTable2009.pdf
BestPlacesToWork2009.pdf

This month marked the completion of the Bromberg Workshop on Teaching and Mentoring sponsored by Dr. Scott Weaver and featured hands on activities to enhance teaching skills. Several of our students (Gabriela Kulp, Jeschke laboratory; Austin Elam, Hilser laboratory; Christof Straub, Kurosky laboratory; Anu Roychowdhury, Bujalowski laboratory; Tzuni Garcia, Braun/Oberhauser laboratory, Cheryl Hart, Sastry laboratory and Paige Sanders, BBSC) attended and received teaching certificates. The mentoring workshop was led by Dr. Regino Perez-Polo.

The Biological Chemistry Student Organization (BCSO) has several more activities planned for the summer. If you’d like to join them, please contact one of the officers http://bmb.utmb.edu/graduate_program/BCSO/officers.html

Saturday, July 18 – BCSO Summer Party
Thursday, August 6 – BCSO Meeting
Wednesday, August 12 – Rock Climbing
A Celebration to Honor Lee-Nien Lillian Chan for her 31 Professional Years Dedicated to Science, Students and Colleagues

By James C. Lee, Ph.D.

Students, friends, and family members gathered on July 10, 2009 at Fisherman’s Wharf in Galveston to honor and celebrate Lillian Chan’s life, work and contributions to science and education. The respect and love for Lillian were freely expressed by everyone in attendance. It was a celebration by members of her ‘families’ to honor an extraordinary person. The celebration was attended by over 80 and more would have come if it were not limited by space.

The meeting started appropriately by the testimonies of students and alumni. The consensus is that Lillian is not only a great educator, but even more so as a great role model for her students. There is no better expression of this sentiment than the following quote from the letter by Andy Kurtz to Lillian:

“I have always been very appreciative of the opportunity to study at UTMB, and to be a part of a graduate program that you guided with your talents and leadership. But I now realize that so many of the opportunities you helped provide for us were not rights; they were privileges. And the lengths to which you would go to provide these opportunities were not requirements; they were gifts.

So, while we can never repay these gifts, on the eve of your retirement I hope that you realize how much we, your current and former students, will always be deeply indebted to you for giving them. They are truly the foundation upon which we will build our own successes, to advance our chosen fields the best way that we can.

I don’t know who is credited with this quote, but someone once said: “A good teacher is like a candle – it consumes itself to light the way for others.”

I can’t think of a better metaphor to describe your tenure as the Graduate Program Director of BMB, and I can’t thank you enough for playing such a key role in lighting the way.

But please know how grateful I am that you provided us the tools to light our own way and, perhaps most of all, that you taught us by example that we have a responsibility to light the way for others, with the same passion that you had for us.”

Her colleagues sang, made jokes and animated cartoons to express their respect for Lillian. One of the most hilarious presentations is entitled “Top ten reasons Dr. Chan should not retire!” by members of The Biological Chemistry Student Organization. We have discovered a new standup comic in Austin Elam.

After dinner, Lillian’s family members (Laura Hsu, Tehsheng Chan) presented a historical account of the Ling family which traveled to many points of China and Asia during the war years. Barbara Wallis, Lillian’s friend when they were in graduate school in Wisconsin, described Lillian’s outstanding contributions to science. Her first publication was in Nature. Aubrey Thompson, a former colleague, traveled from Florida to pay her a warm tribute.

The party concluded with presentations of gifts from the Department and friends. This includes a crystal with the inscription:
"For all the wisdom, organizational talents, hard work, camaraderie, fairness under pressure, straightforwardness, humor, sincerity and kindness......
Your friends thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

An endowment “The Lee-Nien Lillian Chan Endowment Fund” was established to honor the legacy of Lillian Chan and the fund is “for the benefit of the graduate students in the Graduate Program in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. Funds distributed from the endowment shall be used to enhance and broaden graduate student training by supporting student-selected seminar speakers, travel awards for students to attend scientific meetings, and other functions or activities to promote networking and develop interpersonal skills.” Contributions can be made by contacting Ann Anderson [ananders@utmb.edu], Director of Development, UTMB Graduate School PHONE : (409) 747-1233 FAX :(409) 747-0772. Forms can be found here.

Members of the Department and the Graduate Program should be proud of themselves to have such an outstanding person as a colleague who has dedicated her energy totally to her work and the betterment of the Department and Graduate Program. For those who made the special effort to participate in the celebration, you were rewarded by a warm and collegial experience that will, I hope, always remain with you. Treasure the moment and try to maintain the example that Lillian has brought to us.

The event was the labor of love for many people, e.g. members of the Organizing Committee (Wayne Bolen, Debora Botting, Vincent Dimayuga, Louise Prakash, Sarita Sastry and Cheryl Watson). The time, effort and thoughtfulness of Lavanya Rajagopalan, Austin Elam, Kurtis Anderson and many more are what made this celebration such a memorable event for everyone.

On behalf of every current and future member of BMB, thanks to each one of these key players in their separate roles in making this possible.

Lillian, enjoy your well deserved retirement. Happy and safe biking!!!

Links to some of the other videos shown at the celebration:

Let’s Do Lunch  
Can Can  
Fries and Ketchup  

Women's Weightlifting  
Unnecessary Force
Publications


Faculty on the Road

Dr. Sankar Mitra gave a talk at the ASM DNA Repair& Mutagenesis Conference in Whistler, Canada on May 30-June 4 that was attended by a majority of the leading scientists in the field from USA, Europe and Japan.

He then traveled to Geiranger, Norway to give a talk at the 2nd Erling Seeberg Memorial Symposium on June 20-24.

On June 26th, he was in Sweden and gave a seminar at the University of Uppsala.

Dr. Satish K. Srivastava traveled to the University of North Texas Science Center in Fort Worth, TX to collaborate with Drs. S. Singhal, Y. Awasthi, and Dr. A. Bhatnagar from University of Louisville, Louisville, KY. June 20 thru June 27th.
Featured Abstract by BMB Faculty

Zinc Binding in Pestivirus N(pro) Is Required for Interferon Regulatory Factor 3 Interaction and Degradation.


Pestiviruses, such as bovine viral diarrhea virus and classical swine fever virus (CSFV), use the viral protein N(pro) to subvert host cell antiviral responses. N(pro) is the first protein encoded by the single large open reading frame of the pestivirus positive-sense RNA genome and has an autoproteolytic activity, cleaving itself off from the polyprotein. N(pro) also targets interferon regulatory factor 3 (IRF3), a transcription factor for alpha/beta interferon genes, and promotes its proteasomal degradation, a process that is independent of the proteolytic activity of N(pro). We determined that N(pro) contains a novel metal-binding TRASH motif consisting of Cys-X(21)-Cys-X(3)-Cys (where X is any amino acid) at its C-terminus. We also found that N(pro) coordinates a single zinc atom as determined by graphite furnace-atomic absorption spectrophotometry and inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry. Mutational and biochemical analyses show that the cysteine residues in the TRASH motif are required for zinc binding and protein stability. Individual substitutions of the cysteines in the TRASH motif of CSFV N(pro) abolished the interaction of N(pro) with IRF3 and resulted in the loss of virus-mediated IRF3 degradation in CSFV-infected cells. Thus, the zinc-binding ability of N(pro) in pestiviruses appears to be essential for the virus-mediated degradation of IRF3.