

Dr. Oliver Smithies to be First Maren Visiting Professor

The prominent scientist Oliver Smithies, Ph.D., Excellence Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, will be the first Maren Visiting Professor at MDIBL. He will give the Thomas H. Maren Memorial Lecture on Wednesday, July 11 at 8 p.m. in Maren Auditorium and spend July 11 and 12 meeting with students and investigators both formally and informally. Dr. Smithies is one of the originators of gene targeting, which allows the precise insertion of genes into mammalian cells and led to the creation of knockout mouse models of human disease.

Having focused for many years on developing animal models of human genetic diseases, Smithies' laboratory presently concentrates on understanding the genetics of complex diseases with multigenetic and environmental components. He has utilized the techniques of his laboratory to study cystic fibrosis, essential hypertension, and pre-eclampsia.

Dr. Smithies earned his B.A., M.A., and D.Phil. degrees at Oxford in physiology and biochemistry, and conducted his postdoctoral work in physical chemistry. This academically mixed background has left him, he says, "not at all nervous of things that happen in animals or molecular things." He is known not only a geneticist but as an inventor. Early in his career (1950), he invented starch-gel electrophoresis, which revolutionized the approach to separating and analyzing proteins.

Dr. Smithies' wife, Nobuyo Maeda, Ph.D., Robert H. Wagner Distinguished Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, will accompany him to MDIBL and also be available to meet with investigators and students. Presently, her laboratory studies the molecular pathology of atherogenesis, utilizing the haptoglobin gene family as a model to determine how variations of genes are generated, particularly in multi-gene families.

The Maren Visiting Professorship was created by the Maren Foundation to give the outstanding scientists who deliver the annual Maren Lecture additional opportunities to interact with MDIBL students and scientists. Emily Sabah-Maren, trustee of the Foundation and widow of Thomas H. Maren, a longtime MDIBL researcher known for his pioneering investigations of

carbonic anhydrase, explains, “My husband was a strong proponent of the concept of visiting professors and the benefits gained by having them share their knowledge and experience with both those who have equivalent expertise and those who do not. He not only believed in this type of interaction, but lived it, bringing many such individuals to both the College of Medicine of the University of Florida in Gainesville, where he was on the faculty, and to MDIBL – including Hans Krebs and Hans Ussing.”

Dr. Smithies has won numerous awards for his research, including the Lasker Award in 2001, the Okamoto International Award in 2000, the Gairdner Foundation International Award in 1990 and 1993, and honorary doctorates from the University of Chicago and Duke University. This year he was awarded the Thomas Hunt Morgan Medal for lifetime contributions in the field of genetics. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1971 and became a Foreign Member of the Royal Society of London in 1998.

Now 81, he still works at his laboratory bench nearly every day, exploring new ideas and revisiting old ones. “It’s not the achievements,” Smithies explains. “It’s got more to do with curiosity, trying to solve problems, understand something.” Susan Fellner, M.D., MDIBL investigator and trustee of the Maren Foundation, says of Dr. Smithies, “He defines exuberance.”

The Mount Desert Island Biological Laboratory, founded in 1898, is one of the leading marine research institutions in the world. The non-profit, independent research institution has a three-fold mission to promote research and education in the biology of marine organisms; to foster understanding and preservation of the environment; and to advance human health.
