

For Immediate Use  
November 12, 2009

## **Obituary: Eli Sercarz, 75, noted UCLA immunologist**

Roxanne Moster, [rmoster@mednet.ucla.edu](mailto:rmoster@mednet.ucla.edu)  
310-794-0777

*(Note to editors: Digital images are available upon request.)*

Dr. Eli Sercarz, a highly regarded researcher and teacher in the field of immunology, died November 3, 2009 in Topanga, Calif. Sercarz was a professor emeritus of the department of microbiology and molecular genetics at UCLA. He was 75.

“Eli Sercarz was a giant intellect and a devoted mentor, colleague and friend. He cannot be replaced,” said Dr. Bevra Hahn, professor of medicine at UCLA.

According to his colleagues, Sercarz’s research reshaped the field of immunology. His studies focused on understanding how some white blood cells initiate immune responses that lead to autoimmunity (which occurs when the body begins fighting its own cells), while others are protective, able to inhibit such responses.

Among his many contributions to immunology, Sercarz discovered “cryptic determinants.” These are regions of a protein that are usually hidden from the immune system, but may be presented to white blood cells in the setting of autoimmune diseases and cancer.

He also detailed a process known as “determinant spreading,” a process through which an auto-reactive immune response continues to evolve and

spread to additional white blood cells, which in turn respond to additional and more diverse targets.

Sercarz was born in New York. He earned his Ph.D. in immunology from Harvard in 1960, and did postdoctoral research fellowships at Harvard and MIT through 1962. The following year, he joined the faculty of UCLA as an assistant professor of immunology in what was then the department of bacteriology. He advanced from assistant professor to attain the prestigious rank of "Professor Above Scale," a status reserved for UCLA professors who have made novel and important contributions to their fields. He served UCLA for 34 years, and was awarded the title of professor emeritus upon retirement in 1997.

"He was an enormously creative thinker," said Dr. Jeffery Miller, chair of microbiology, immunology and molecular genetics at UCLA. "The work Eli Sercarz performed has applications that extend throughout immunology and beyond. Eli's research helps lead the way for developing new treatments for autoimmune diseases, novel cancer therapies based on activating anti-tumor immune responses, and better vaccines for infectious diseases. Most recently, Eli's laboratory was trying to understand how the immune system triggers type 1 diabetes, in the hope of finding ways to control it. His insights and ideas will have impact far into the future"

After leaving UCLA, Sercarz accepted a position at the La Jolla Institute for Allergy and Immunology, where he stayed for five years. He subsequently served as head of the division of immune regulation at the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies in San Diego.

Throughout his career, Sercarz traveled the world as an invited lecturer. He addressed the National Academy of Science Institute of Medicine Commission on Vaccine Priorities, and presented the Burroughs-Wellcome Lecture at Johns Hopkins University in 1998.

He was a two-time recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship, an Exchange Appointee of the National Academy of Sciences, a co-recipient of the Nachman International Prize in Rheumatology, and a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Federation of Clinical Immunology Societies. Sercarz was listed by *Thomas Scientific* as one of the most frequently cited immunologists in the world. Most appropriately, he

received the American Association of Immunologists Excellence in Mentoring award in 2007.

“Eli Sercarz was one of the most highly esteemed immunologists in the world. He will be remembered not only for research that changed his field, but also as a beloved teacher, mentor, and friend. Few men can claim such a huge legacy of scientific achievement; fewer still will be so widely remembered and missed,” said Dr. Jonathan Braun, chair of the department of pathology and laboratory medicine of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

The family is planning a celebration of Dr. Sercarz’ life on November 29<sup>th</sup>.

-UCLA-