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College Cornell People

Microbiology & Immunology to welcome new chair



Avery August, Professor of Immunology in the Department of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences at Penn State University, will lead the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's Department of Microbiology & Immunology (M&I), effective July 1. Dr. August will succeed David Russell, Professor of Molecular Microbiology, who has been at the helm of M&I since 2000. In the following interview, Dr. August shares his thoughts about the upcoming transition, his background, and his vision for the department.

What motivated your decision to come to Cornell?

August: I am very excited by the opportunity to work with this outstanding group of faculty members. David Russell has done a superb job assembling a great group of colleagues within M&I, and there are many outstanding complementary resources across Cornell. I look forward to increasing the department's level of interdisciplinary collaboration with other parts of the College of Veterinary Medicine and the university, particularly with Weill Medical College, but also with Ithaca-based departments such as plant pathology, nutritional science, and biomedical engineering.

What will be your immediate priorities for the department? Longer-term aspirations?

August: One immediate objective will be to fill the open positions in the department. I will work hard to convince the best and brightest young people in the field that Cornell is a place where they can truly build their careers. My long-term vision is one of broader interactions with other Cornell units. It is important for us to build greater cohesiveness between Ithaca and Weill, particularly among graduate students and faculty on the two campuses. I look forward to expanding joint seminars and

videoconferencing activity.

Tell us about your own research interests.

August: My original work was studying how T-cells are activated by pathogens – what are the signal transduction pathways that these cells use to sense the presence of viruses and bacteria, and can we manipulate these pathways to alter the immune response associated with diseases such as allergic asthma or accelerate it in response to vaccinations? We are now looking at how we might manipulate these pathways to develop better “memory” in the immune system. For example, can we prevent the symptoms associated with the early immune response to vaccines while still imprinting the memory of the vaccine on the immune system? We also have a strong interest in signal transduction pathways at the molecular level and how these pathways affect how immune cells actually develop in prenatal and young individuals. While our work is considered basic in nature, I have collaborated with pharmaceutical companies that are interested in using our results to develop practical therapeutic applications.

What originally drew you to a scientific career?

August: As an undergraduate with an interest in biology, I thought at first that I might eventually attend medical school. But I realized that I was actually more interested in investigating the underlying processes and mechanisms of disease than in clinical work. A professor of organic chemistry steered me toward laboratory research. It is a hard, long process, but the successes keep you going. After I took an undergraduate immunology course, I was hooked. I found it fascinating that our immune system is already programmed to “respond” to any pathogen with which it will encounter. I decided to attend graduate school in immunology.

What can you tell us about your life outside the lab?

August: I moved to Los Angeles from Belize with my family as a teenager. My wife is an elementary school guidance counselor, and we have three daughters – the youngest of whom is interested in becoming a veterinarian. We also have a dog. I enjoy foreign films and pickup soccer, and we look forward to enjoying the many restaurants and cultural attractions that Ithaca has to offer.

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