

IN MEMORIAM

David L. Garbers

1944–2006

DAVID L. GARBERS, A DISTINGUISHED SCIENTIST AND AN HHMI INVESTIGATOR FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, DIED SUDDENLY ON SEPTEMBER 5. HE WAS 62.



Garbers was a professor of pharmacology and director of the Cecil H. and Ida Green Center for Reproductive Biology Sciences at the University of Texas (UT) Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, and one of the longest-serving HHMI investigators.

“David was an easygoing, honest, straightforward person,” says collaborator and friend David E. Clapham, a neurobiologist and HHMI investigator at Harvard Medical School. “He believed that science is about finding the truth, and that you should present data the way they are, warts and all. You don’t have to sell the results, because after all, it will not change how the thing you are studying really works. He also appreciated the humor in the crazy ways scientists behave, and could laugh at himself.”

His interest in how things work was born on the farm where he grew up in La Crosse, Wisconsin. From there, he studied at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in animal science in 1966, a master’s in reproductive biology in 1970, and a doctorate in biochemistry in 1972. He completed a postdoctoral research fellowship in physiology at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville. In 1974, he became an assistant professor of physiology at Vanderbilt, where he was appointed an HHMI investigator in 1976, and became a full professor in 1982. He joined the UT Southwestern faculty in 1990 as a professor of pharmacology, and in 1999 was named the director of the Green Center. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, as well as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academy of Medicine, Engineering, and Science of Texas.

“Dave Garbers was a pillar of our department at UT Southwestern, both as a scientist and mentor,” says David J. Mangelsdorf, also an HHMI investigator who was recruited by Garbers to UT Southwestern. “Few could match his unpretentious style, wisdom, and knack for taking a research project in the right direction.”

His science focused on sperm biology and signal transduction. Studying the sperm cells of sea urchins, he discovered a novel family of receptors that enable the sperm to swim in the right direction. He subsequently found these same receptors on higher organisms, including mammals. More recently, Garbers identified proteins expressed only on sperm cells, including an ion channel that gives a sperm the wiggle it needs to penetrate the egg membrane. Details of that work are on page 8. His research has opened opportunities for new contraceptives and ways to increase fertility. Garbers’s scientific interests also extended to stem cell biology and the development of techniques to grow male germ cells in the laboratory.

For several years, Garbers taught an annual physiology course at the Marine Biology Lab at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. That’s where he reconnected in 2000 with David Clapham, whom he’d met a decade earlier at a signal transduction meeting in Scotland. “David invited me to come to Woods Hole to give a talk about calcium signaling,” says Clapham. Turns out the two had found proteins that were constituents of the same ion channel involved in sperm motility. “We’ve been working together on them ever since.”

Garbers was the father of Lesley FitzGerald, of McKinney, Texas, and Michael Garbers, of Lewisville, Texas. He loved being a grandfather to his two grandchildren, Hailey and Austin, according to Clapham. “He talked about them often,” his friend recalls. “That fatherly nature of his was also true in his dealing with postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. He had their best interests at heart. He was willing to give advice and was not hard to approach.”

Mangelsdorf agrees, calling Garbers “a superb recruiter and promoter of junior faculty. My first visit with him, which I will never forget, was one of the reasons I chose to start my independent career at UT Southwestern, and my many interactions with him thereafter are a main reason I am still here. As a friend, colleague, and confidant, I will miss him.” ■