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## 2000

### James Sabry

Science was an early part of life for James Sabry, the son of two scientists. Sabry was born and raised near Toronto, Canada, where his father, Zak Sabry, was a biochemist and his mother, the late Jean Sabry, was a nutritionist who was interested in nutrition issues in the third world and rural Canada. In the 1980's, his father became head of the World Food Program at the United Nations based in Rome. After returning to the U.S., Zak Sabry moved to California where he now serves on the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley.

Sabry attended Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, where he majored in chemistry. Following his undergraduate education, he continued onto medical school there. After receiving his MD in 1983, Sabry served as an intern in general internal medicine at the University of Toronto for one year. In 1984 he moved to the United States where he began a three-year neurology residency at Harvard Medical School. Sabry recalls that Harvard was appealing because of the way it uniquely combined biological science and medicine, an important theme for him throughout his career.

As he completed his residency, Sabry became interested in basic science, but realized that he was largely uninformed about biology and genetics since his undergraduate studies had focused almost entirely on chemistry and physics.

In 1989 Sabry moved to San Francisco to serve as Adjunct Professor of Neurology at the University of California, at the same time returning to school as a graduate student at UCSF to learn more basic science. Throughout his Ph.D. program at UCSF, Sabry continued teaching and practicing medicine by maintaining an outpatient clinic in adult neurology.

During his graduate work in Marc Kirschner's lab at UCSF, Sabry's interest in the interaction between cell biology and medicine led to his work on microtubule dynamics in axonal guidance and axonal transport.

Kirschner, who was President of the ASCB and is now at Harvard, commented, "James is an extraordinary individual with a wide breadth and understanding of science and medicine. James came to my lab to do his Ph.D. after he had finished his training and board certification in neurology. He helped refocus my laboratory toward questions of the role of the cytoskeleton in axon migration and made contributions in the area of microtubule dynamics in growth cone path finding and in slow axonal transport."

After receiving his Ph.D. in 1994, Sabry spent three years as a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Biochemistry at Stanford Medical School, working with another former ASCB President, James Spudich, on myosin regulation during cytokinesis.

The next phase of Sabry's life was a radical change from earlier experience. In April 1998, Sabry and three cell biology colleagues, Spudich, Ronald Vale, and Lawrence Goldstein, co-founded a new biotechnology company, Cytokinetics. Sabry and his co-founders had pioneered the discovery and characterization of proteins comprising the cytoskeleton, and established the company to "transcend the life sciences and information technologies sectors."

Sabry explains that "Cytokinetics is focused on the complementary missions of drug discovery and the commercialization of novel cellular bioinformatics technologies. Cytokinetics drug discovery programs are exploiting the field of cytoskeletal pharmacology for the identification of entirely novel classes of therapeutic compounds." Sabry notes that it is important for cell biologists to be oriented to the therapeutic potential and implications of basic science. "Researchers need to remember that there is an important relationship between basic science and disease," he says.

"Although it may seem unusual that someone with such exceptional talent in experimental science should forgo a personal career at the bench so early in his career and found a biotech company," remarks Kirschner, "knowing James you would not be surprised by dramatic decisions — he has always been motivated by big issues. The opportunity to apply his basic knowledge in cell biology with his medical background in the development of new therapeutic drugs through novel assays is a mark of his idealism and his creativity."

Sabry believes that the physician scientist has an important role to play in "translating" between the cell and the body. In the current era of declining numbers of physician researchers, Sabry believes that the ASCB has an important role to play in preparing the next generation of researchers for the evolving world of cell biology by helping all researchers gain these skills.

For years, Sabry has been interested in understanding cell processes and their application with therapeutics. Much of the current work at Cytokinetics is focused on "development of diverse groups of pharmaceutical lead compounds that represent the first known potent and specific small molecule modulators of molecular motor activity. These compounds have demonstrated novel mechanisms of action and are active against a proprietary target that has been proven essential for mitotic spindle function and cell division."

Cytokinetics is building on Sabry's personal interest in linking cell processes with therapeutics through the use of small molecules by developing small molecules that will bind to proteins in the cell and alter their properties.

For those considering the switch to biotech, Sabry advises the consideration of three factors about biotech: (1) one must embrace the business, learning how the organization is governed and how decisions are made, and understand that the business of the company is to increase the value of the company; (2) one must realize that s/he is in the business for a particular purpose (e.g., drug discovery), and (3) one must work in a team approach. While biotech work and the necessity of maintaining confidentiality in private industry may seem unnaturally restrictive to some, Sabry is quick to point out that many biotech companies are fast-paced and well financed, with the benefit of clear goals that provide researchers immense satisfaction.

As CEO of a 65-person start-up, Sabry has become a businessman first and a scientist second. His time is spent dealing with the company's needs, finding new investors, and investor relations. But Sabry enjoys providing technical advice when needed.

Constant travel, long workdays, and a never-ending series of business breakfasts and dinners tend to be a drain on personal time. Sabry's free time, if any, is focused on family, which Sabry describes as "the center of my universe." Even relaxation relates to work. When time permits, Sabry makes business contacts while playing squash. He notes that the skills required for squash parallel the skills one needs in business — strategy and quick consideration of alternatives.

Sabry has one brother, Charles, an electrical engineer who designs Internet hardware; he has worked in Ottawa for 15 years designing and building Internet ASIC structures. Sabry and his wife, Sandra Spence, live in northern California with their 16-month-old daughter, Clare. Spence also trained in science, but after completing her Ph.D. did not go into science directly. For the last 15 years Spence has worked as product manager in a high tech company in Silicon Valley. The couple is expecting twins in September.