

# Drawing it together

## Dr. Amy Arai wins Excellence in Teaching Award

Written by Karen Carlson • Photograph by James Hawker

With a few clicks of the mouse, Amy Arai, Ph.D., associate professor, Department of Pharmacology, uses PowerPoint software to create a simple outline of a stomach to accompany her lecture on peripheral decarboxylase. “It’s nicer to show a cartoon so students can get the big idea of how drugs work,” she says. “Visuals reinforce the textbook and make it easier for the students to get an intuitive grasp of the topic.”

Dr. Arai was one of this year’s recipients of the Excellence in Teaching Award, given by the SIU Academy for Scholarship in Education. She was noted for her lectures, her teaching style and innovations in medical education. She is director of the Neuromuscular and Behavior unit and a funded researcher in neuroscience and pharmacology.

To keep students interested, Dr. Arai relates her teachings to clinical issues. “I will talk about drugs used in clinics and the related physiological, anatomy and biochemistry issues,” she says. “Students have to understand those basic sciences and how they’re related.”

She strives to keep her teaching broad to keep it relevant, inviting clinicians to speak during her lectures, and having a clinician, a pharmacologist, a pathologist or microbiologist deliver the wrap-up sessions. “Our department wants to bring the sciences together to help understanding in a broad, integrated manner.”

She is chapter president of the local neuroscience society. Students have praised her lectures as “succinct” and “understandable,” and Dr. Arai as “articulate and helpful.” Students have said she is the best tutor and have called for her to be “cloned.”

Dr. Arai also is an innovator who created a prototype of the electronic Problem-Based Learning Module (ePBLM), an online version that has replaced paper manuals for first and second-year students.



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All her cases in the Neuromuscular and Behavior unit are ePBLM, and all problem-based learning cases for the first and second year of SIU School of Medicine’s curriculum are based on this method.

“If we use the right electronic method, we can promote the interaction and integration so that the faculty and students are on the same page. Electronics in that sense can be very helpful,” she says.

Dr. Arai acknowledges that there are some drawbacks to online learning. Students can take a shortcut by copying and pasting material instead of using their own language. Plus, the Internet makes it very easy to access advanced information. But without a framework of basic knowledge, she says, this information may not mean very much.

That’s where her lectures come in, she says, to create a framework of the basics, and make sure the students understand the learning objectives of each lecture. “Once you make a framework, it’s easy to add something new.”

It’s the something new that keeps Dr. Arai excited about teaching. “I like to study,” she says. “I get excited about an

area and like to share it with my students.” While her research is in synaptic physiology and band plasticity, being an educator encourages her to broaden her studies to cover a wide range of diseases, which she says is helpful for her research. “When I am preoccupied with my research, I often fail to pay attention to other topics. But so many things are connected, I should have a broad knowledge about science in general.”

Dr. Arai is satisfied to let her lectures and innovations stand out. “It doesn’t matter if students remember me,” she says, “As long as they remember the content!” ●●●