

press

DATE: February 3, 1975

TO : David A. Prince, M.D.
Chairman, Neurobiology Search Committee

FROM : Joshua Lederberg, Ph.D.
Chairman, Department of Genetics

SUBJECT:

Dear Dave,

I am happy to respond to your letter of January 29th with regard to your committee's evaluation of Eric Shooter as a possible candidate for the chairperson of neurobiology. In responding to your letter I have in mind the background material on the qualifications that we expect from a candidate for this position.

I recruited Eric to augment the faculty of this department at the time of the establishment of the Kennedy Laboratories for Molecular Medicine. This gift from the Kennedy Foundation was in response to our commitment to pursue a program of molecular biology of the central nervous system, which I interpreted as the protein biochemistry of the brain. Its relationship to genetics is best articulated by drawing the analogy of studies on the genetic determination of hemoglobin structure and the impact that these have had both on basic molecular biology and on clinical insight into hematological disease.

In fact, Eric's prior work had been primarily in the field of homoglobin structure and his transition into the functions of this new post was undertaken at a time when very few others had the trepidation to undertake such a leap.

Not surprisingly Eric's career has been an extremely fruitful one but did not conform in any simple way to the predictions that prevailed when he first arrived. He found in studies on the nerve growth factor an obviously riper arena for investigation than the bolder, more problematical, and possibly unfeasible program of comprehensive study of the major structural proteins that we had in mind at the very beginning. That work has been pursued with great energy and substantial success but has undoubtedly been overshadowed by the studies on the secondary structure - and to some extent primary - of NGF and the relationship between this and its function in nerve growth.

I am sure that you will be able to secure, without difficulty, even more critical and incisive judgements about Eric's scientific work from others who may be able to offer their remarks with the detachment of greater distance and the expertise of direct participation in similar experimental efforts. I will be appending a list of such individuals that may be helpful to you. I have every confidence that your responses will be at the highest level of commendation in view of the insistent demands that have been placed upon Eric's time for service on grants review study sections, symposia, editorial boards, and similar signs of wide repute. I will therefore take more time primarily to discuss Eric's role in a personal and administrative capacity since in my own judgement these are sometimes given grossly inadequate attention in recruiting candidates for the chairperson role. We know in practice that success in that role depends equally upon the personal

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stature and administrative skill of the incumbent as it does upon his narrower scholarly accomplishments.

My relationship with Eric as a fellow member of the department over the years has, of course, provided innumerable opportunities to test his interest and enthusiasm and intelligence in dealing with problems relating to the scholarly functions of the department and the school, and his collegial style in responding to them. Let me just say, I have never had occasion to do other than congratulate ourselves for having recruited him into the role he occupies. Eric has also played an important part in a number of school-wide and university-connected academic committees, perhaps most notably the search committee for the deanship that culminated in the appointment of the present incumbent. I know that he gave this challenge an extraordinary degree of attention and concern and that his colleagues on the committee were most grateful for the meticulousness with which all opportunities were investigated and with which their inputs were accepted, processed, and mediated until a creative consensus and a successful outcome were assured.

I have been less directly involved in Eric's involvement with the Neurobiology Program per se, with the attempts to recruit others into the chair, and with the financing and planning of the building now under construction. I do know that he played an important role on all of these matters but I will leave it to other members of the Neurobiology Program to comment in more detail on the initiative and the quality of sustained effort that went into them. The referees that will be listed can also tell you more at first hand of his labors on national committees which have influenced not only the development of neurobiology as an identifiable discipline, but many other aspects important to the continued support and development of health science research.

With your letter was appended the report of the ad hoc committee on the Department of Neurobiology and I can only remark that the doctrine presented there represents in large measure the same interests that Eric has often expressed to me concerning the nature and role that the new department should have - this is hardly surprising as he is a signatory and again the committee itself can speak better than I can about Eric's role in the matter. Let me add, however, my own enthusiastic support for the concepts of the department that are articulated there. The concerns expressed by a number of students and summarized in your memo of January 6th were of course taken account of by your ad hoc committee. Although Dr. Shooter's own research interests are of course primarily at the molecular level, this in no way conflicts with the plea for balancing with regard to studies at a structural and an integrative level addressed by the students. No single person could possibly encompass the entire range of studies that relate to neurobiology today. Clinical neurology in contemporary practice is, of course, very heavily dependent on structural considerations, but it takes little imagination to see that there will inevitably be a tremendous broadening of the clinical applications of studies at the molecular level which today are the province of the basic science laboratory. The most effective answer to the students' concern is to seek a candidate who understands for the need for a wide breadth of approach, and who will be able to lead an activity in neurobiology that effectively complements and can be warmly related to existing programs under the aegis of the Department of Neurology. In my own judgement Dr. Shooter

would most ably fulfil all of these criteria. His teaching of the biochemistry of hemoglobin in the Departments of Biochemistry and Genetics already exhibit these qualities as does a significant part of his current research on the application of knowledge of NGF.

All in all, I would regard Dr. Shooter to be an exemplary prospect for filling the chair, albeit I make this statement without having had the opportunity to make a critical comparison with other promising possibilities currently under review by the committee. Over a period of years he has told me that he had no particular desire for that appointment, and by and large would prefer that the vacancy be used to attract some superb scientist and entrepreneur who might otherwise not be induced to come to Stanford. The sincerity of his position is unassailable in the light of past history. I know that during the last year or two that so many of the burdens of the planning for the department and its facilities and so forth have fallen upon his shoulders that he might now well believe that his own appointment as chairperson would lessen rather than augment his responsibilities, unless it were again indeed possible to bring someone into the position of extraordinary additional capability. I am not in a position to judge whether this is or is not the present circumstance facing your committee. I can only say that I would rely very heavily on Dr. Shooter's own judgement on such a point and that I have unmitigated confidence both in the integrity and the maturity of his judgement on such issues.

Obviously, one further question that would have to be resolved were he to undertake these new responsibilities is his continued relationship to our own department. This is not a matter which I wish to pursue without having consulted him further in more detail; but I can assure him and the committee that the department will be delighted to make any reasonable accommodation that appears to be in the best interest of the school, the respective departments, and Dr. Shooter personally. In other words, I do not believe this is a consideration that should be regarded as material to his and your consideration of the possibility of his appointment as chairman of neurobiology.

JL/rr