

Editorial Note on Mutagenesis

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In molecular biology, mutagenesis is an important laboratory technique whereby DNA mutations are deliberately engineered to produce libraries of mutant genes, proteins, strains of bacteria, or other genetically modified organisms. The various constituents of a gene, as well as its regulatory elements and its gene products, may be mutated so that the functioning of a genetic locus, process, or product can be examined in detail. The mutation may produce mutant proteins with interesting properties or enhanced or novel functions that may be of commercial use. Mutant strains may also be produced that have practical application or allow the molecular basis of a particular cell function to be investigated.

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Mutations can have beneficial effects, deleterious effects, or no consequences in organisms. Certain mutations have a positive effect on the organism. The sickle cell mutation in the hemoglobin gene and hence the hemoglobin protein molecule, for instance, is thought to give humans in Africa an ability to survive malaria better. The resulting mutated hemoglobin aggregates in the red blood cells, leading them to assume a sickled shape, which makes it difficult for the malarial parasite to enter and infect the red blood cells. Many mutations are neutral and have no significant effect on the organism at all. However, certain types of mutations can have deleterious consequences in organisms.

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Chih-Chang Chu*

Department of Medicine, Florida State University, USA

*Corresponding author: Dr. Chih-Chang Chu

✉ cc62@cornell.edu

Department of Medicine, Florida State University, USA.

Tel: 6072551938

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