Erikson Honored for Nutrition Research

GREENSBORO, N.C. – Dr. Keith Erikson, an associate professor of nutrition at UNCG, has received the 2010 Mead Johnson Award for his investigation of how the trace elements iron and manganese affect the brain.

The award from the American Society for Nutrition recognizes a researcher for excellence in work conducted within 10 years of completing postgraduate training. He accepted the award, sponsored by Mead Johnson Nutritionals, at the recent Experimental Biology meeting in Anaheim, Calif.

“This is one of the most prestigious awards given to young nutrition researchers,” said Debbie Kipp, chair of the UNCG Department of Nutrition. “It’s a credit both to Keith and the caliber of nutrition research taking place here at UNCG. Those of us who work alongside Keith know the exceptional quality of his research, but it’s nice to see a national organization recognize it, too.”

Erikson researches fundamental questions about the interactions of iron and manganese in the developing brain and the neurological consequences of their dietary imbalance. In a series of four articles, he established that decreased iron in the brain disrupts normal neurotransmitter activity.

His laboratory has established that insufficient dietary iron leads to a dangerous accumulation of manganese in dopamine-rich brain regions. This manganese toxicity interferes with GABA, the chief inhibitory neurotransmitter, causing symptoms that resemble Parkinson’s disease. His subsequent research has continued to explore the effects of manganese on GABA and other neurotransmitters that modulate dopamine, including norepinephrine.

Erikson earned his doctorate from Pennsylvania State University in 2000 and joined the UNCG faculty in 2003 following a stint as a postdoctoral research associate at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. He received UNCG’s Research Excellence Award for 2006-07.

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