Lettvin celebrates his sixtieth birthday

By Stephanie Pollock

February 23 will be the sixtieth birthday of Professor Jerome Y. Lettvin, and a series of special talks honoring this event will be taking place tomorrow in 10-250.

The program will consist primarily of presentations of papers on neurology and neurophysiology. Lettvin will not be making a presentation on any one subject, he plans to use the occasion to apologize for misleading those who were his students. Apparently not all of those students minded being misled — one paper being presented Saturday is entitled "A wrong but interesting Lettvin model." Other topics range from "Flip-flops in the brain" to "A quineanx of quinines" to "Olfactory detection Mother Nature at her conservative best."

"His unique title, Professor of Communication Physiology, was 'chosen out of a hat by Jerry Wiesner, who figured that it would confuse everybody.'"

Lettvin first came to MIT as a student, after "Norbert Weiner insisted I learn something about math and physics." Before that, Lettvin had been a union organizer, had gone to the University of Illinois Medical School (graduating at the age of 23), and had been a psychiatrist in the services during World War II. After a year at MIT, Lettvin went to Hollywood for a few months and wrote horror pictures for Warner Brothers. He went back to Illinois, where he married. His wife Maggie is infamous in her own right as a physical education instructor at the Institute. Lettvin worked in a state hospital in Illinois; teaching himself physiology, until he returned to MIT as a research assistant in 1951.

Lettvin says he is looking forward to the occasion, and will be on sale. "I am honored" by Saturday's planned festivities. In addition to the presentations, a booklet containing old photographs and anecdotes about Lettvin has been put together for the occasion, and will be on sale. Lettvin says he is looking forward to "reminiscing of the good old days, when we didn't know anything and suspected there was something to know."