Clifford B. Saper received his M.D. and Ph.D. degrees and did his internship in internal medicine at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, before doing a neurology residency at Cornell University Medical Center- New York Hospital. He then joined the faculty of Washington University School of Medicine where he served from 1981-1985 as Assistant and then Associate Professor of Neurology and Anatomy and Neurobiology. He moved to the University of Chicago, where from 1985-1992 he was an Associate Professor, then William D. Mabie Professor of Physiology and Neurology, and Chairman of the Committee on Neurobiology. In 1992, he moved to Harvard Medical School, where he is the James Jackson Putnam Professor of Neurology and Neuroscience. From 1992-2021 he also served as Chairman of the Harvard Department of Neurology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. Dr. Saper served from 1994-2011 as the Editor-in-chief of the Journal of Comparative Neurology and is currently the Editor-in-Chief of Annals of Neurology. Dr. Saper has received a Javits Neuroscience Investigator Award from the National Institutes of Health, and was named one of the 100 most frequently cited neuroscientists by the Institute for Scientific Information. He has served as Vice President and Councilor of the American Neurological Association, and has served on the Publications Committee and has chaired the Program Committee of both that organization and the Society for Neuroscience. He has received the Distinguished Alumnus award from the University of Illinois, the Distinguished Scientist Award from the Sleep Research Foundation, the Sleep Science Award from the American Academy of Neurology, the Ariens Kappers Award from the Netherlands Brain Research Institute, and the Adrian Award from the International Federation for Clinical Neurophysiology. Dr. Saper was elected to the National Academy of Medicine, and has been named a Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Royal College of Physicians (London) and a member of the American Association of Physicians.

Dr. Saper's research has explored circuitry of the brain that controls basic functions such as wake-sleep cycles, thermoregulation, and immune and stress responses, and how these circuits are disrupted in neurological disorders, such as Parkinson's disease, and in sleep disorders such as narcolepsy and sleep apnea, and during aging.