

An appreciation - Vidya Jyothi Dr R O B Wijesekera

Ranjith Mahindapala

Immediate Past President, National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka

It is with great sadness that we record the passing away of Vidya Jyothi Dr R O B Wijesekera (or R O B to many) on 12 July 2021. He was 93.

Dr Wijesekera took chemistry at the University of Ceylon and started his career as a Research Officer at the Medical Research Institute (MRI), primarily working on medicinal plants. He had his postgraduate studies at the University of Sheffield in late 1950's and was well known for his work on tannins. He later joined the Ceylon Institute for Scientific and Industrial Research (CISIR and ITI now) where he took the lead in building the portfolio of projects on natural products. I first met him during this time when he, as a Visiting Lecturer, taught us Organic Chemistry. I was often fascinated by his lectures not because of the organic chemistry content but because he would always connect natural products and plants to organic chemistry. I am not sure whether the syllabus had these elements, but he would go deep into plant products, and on medicinal properties of plants, just as a *Weda Mahatmaya* would explain. Amongst the academic staff, he held a special place as he looked very dapper in matching clothes with a smoking pipe tucked into the trouser belt. When I was doing my postgraduate studies in England, one of the Professors, having learnt that I came from Sri Lanka, asked me about Dr ROB. They had been in Sheffield together, and he held Dr ROB in high esteem. Whenever he saw me, he would ask me about my teacher – that was the respect he had for him.

Dr Wijesekera then moved to the international arena, mostly with UNIDO; he was in the West Indies for a considerable time working on essential oils and was later responsible for developing UNIDO's technical assistance programme on medicinal and aromatic plants. His work was well received by the international community; he was the proud recipient of the Guinness Medal for outstanding achievements. His interest in natural products never faded, and was always eager to research on new areas, especially on medicinal properties of plants.

Upon retirement from UNIDO, he was appointed the Chairman of Industrial Technology Institute (ITI formerly CISIR); our paths crossed again when he was appointed the first Chairman of the newly established National Science & Technology Commission (NASTEC), the apex body to coordinate science and technology. I had just left the Sri Lanka Council for Agricultural Research Policy (CARP) which has a similar mandate on agricultural research. Since he was very keen on having NASTEC achieve its objectives, we would have long discussions on these 'apex' bodies, and how these could be used for betterment of coordination in science and technology. However, at the end of his tenure at NASTEC, he was quite disappointed; the 'apex' bodies which have mandate over several different Ministries could not function properly because coordination was almost impossible – with Ministries having their own empires and doing what they want.

Dr R O B continued to support the scientific community in Sri Lanka. He was a Founder Fellow and an active member of the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka. He was also a Past President of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science and the Institute of Chemistry. One of the lecture halls of the Institute of Chemistry is named after him.

Dr R O B's immense contribution to the development of natural products is well recognised. In the recent past, he helped the private sector in developing natural products. He was a forthright person and would express his views without fear or favour – which he tried hard whilst at NASTEC. His wisdom and the splendid gift of repartee will be sorely missed by the scientific community. His autobiography, *Clouds are not spheres, nor mountains cones*, is a rich collection of his work and life and as he says, a *world of experience to look back on*.

We offer our heartfelt condolences to his family, who steadfastly looked after him during the recent months when he was occasionally unwell.

Chemistry in Sri Lanka

Dr. Ranjith Mahindapala obtained his PhD in Plant Pathology from the University of Exeter, UK. He served as the Director of the Coconut Research Institute of Sri Lanka before joining the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Dr. Mahindapala has served as the President of the National Academy of Sciences, Sri Lanka, and as Executive Director of the Delhi-based Community of Evaluators, South Asia. He currently works as an Independent Evaluator.