

Ian L. Martin (1944-2024)



Dr Ian Martin, Emeritus Professor, Aston University, Birmingham, UK. died in Cambridge on 11 September 2024. He was 80 years old.

It is conventional to start an obituary of a significant scientific figure, such as Ian, with an outline of his career and his achievements. This obituary does of course cover this. However, as friends of Ian, we have chosen to begin with an anecdote which we think captures much of the spirit and genius of the man.

It was 1990, the coffee room in the MRC Molecular Neurobiology Unit in Cambridge. With a colleague, now an FRS, one of us (DRP) was looking blankly at data on the iron-binding affinities for a series of ligands. Ian walked in and greeted us with a smile; “Haven’t you boys sorted that trivial little problem yet?”. The trivial problem had stymied us for several weeks. Ian listened to us, looked at the data, drew heavily on his pipe and then queried “Isn’t it obvious?”. He gently explained to us what a stability constant was, drawing on his training as a chemist, and described what it implied for our work. Our eyes were opened; the data now made sense and a paper eventually resulted. We

asked Ian if he wanted to be an author. Of course he declined; it was reward enough for him that he had been able to help us. This incident could be multiplied manyfold over Ian's working life. A distinguished scientist in his own right, he helped and mentored all those who worked around him with his kindness, wisdom and gentle support.

Ian was born and raised in Stockport, England. After obtaining his undergraduate degree in chemistry from the University of Bristol, he worked in the pharmaceutical industry for 3 years with Pfizer in Sandwich, Kent. He joined the MRC Neuropharmacology Unit at the University of Birmingham in 1969 and while there completed his PhD. In 1980, he joined the MRC Neurochemical Pharmacology Unit (later named the MRC Molecular Neurobiology Unit) in Cambridge as an MRC Scientist and was subsequently promoted to MRC Senior Scientist. In 1992, Ian moved to the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada as Professor and Chair of the Department of Pharmacology. After serving 5 years in that position, he moved back to England, taking up a position as Professor and Head of Pharmacology in the Pharmacy School, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at Aston University in Birmingham. He became an Emeritus Professor upon his retirement from Aston in 2009 and moved to Wicken, Cambridgeshire. He was elected an Honorary Fellow of the British Pharmacological Society in 2010 for his contributions to the discipline.

Ian was well known internationally for his elegant research on the structure and function of receptors involved in anxiety disorders, particularly for his work on benzodiazepines and the GABA-A receptor. This expanded latterly to cover a range of ligand-gated ion channels. Due to his expertise and enthusiasm, he established productive collaborations with scientists not only in the United Kingdom but in several other countries. His papers drew variously on classical pharmacology, electrophysiology, behavioural models, protein chemistry and molecular, structural and computational biology. A talented educator and administrator, he was respected widely by trainees and peers alike for his common sense, approachable manner and great sense of humour. He took a deep interest in the training of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, and many of them became his lifelong friends. His favourite sayings (for example, "The data do not lie" and "Two things float to the top and only one of them is cream") remain cherished by those who heard them. His care for his colleagues was exemplary; he would fight for all he was worth to defend their interests when that was necessary. For those in pressing need, he and Alison would offer themselves unstintingly to give them space to recover.

A funeral service for Ian was held in Cambridge on October 3, 2024 and was attended by family and many former friends and colleagues in person or online. Ian is survived by Alison, his loving wife of 58 years, and by his daughter Anna (James Kirkup), son Andrew (Andrea) and grandchildren William, Annika and Henry.

Glen Baker (University of Alberta) and David Poyner (Aston University).