

David Ong, Professor Emeritus of Biochemistry

Professor David E. Ong died on April 25th of this year, and we have lost a remarkable individual. He served as a member of the Biochemistry Department of the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine from 1970 until 2008 and retired as a Professor Emeritus.

Together with his mentor, Frank Chytil, he changed our understanding of how Vitamin A (also called retinol) functioned. Earlier, Vitamin A was known to be necessary to prevent blindness. The discovery of Cellular Binding Proteins for retinol and retinoic acid (two forms of Vitamin A) by Chytil and Ong expanded the role of this vitamin to include its role in the development of epithelial tissue. These studies revolutionized our understanding of the true role of this vitamin. Further work by investigators worldwide built upon these studies to show that this vitamin has a hormone-like action to regulate gene transcription. In recognition of this work Drs. Ong and Chytil shared the prestigious Osborne and Mendel award of the American Institute of Nutrition in 1983. David Ong continued to study Vitamin A function throughout his career and was considered to be one of the leading authorities in this field. He published widely and was in demand as a speaker internationally. He enjoyed teaching and instituted a course in Scientific Communication in which students were guided in both oral and written descriptions of their research. It became a student favorite.

Dr. Ong was an outstanding scholar. He received a Bachelors degree in Chemistry from Wabash College in 1965 where he graduated *Summa cum laude*, Phi Beta Kappa. He also received a Miles Laboratory scholarship to work part time in their laboratory. This stimulated his decision to become a biochemist. David received his Ph.D. in Biochemistry from Yale University in 1970.

David was a gregarious individual. His interests were far ranging. When he found something that interested him he threw himself into it completely. He was an amateur artist and loved to design charts and diagrams illustrating the multiple functions of Vitamin A. He enjoyed gardening and grew Bonsai plants. He was constantly refining the landscaping around his home. He loved games and had several in his house. A Pinball machine was a favorite of the students who visited there. Perhaps his favorite avocation was music. David loved to attend live performances that are abundant in our Music City, Nashville, and was an authority on the history of Jazz.

David was a congenial companion, knowledgeable on a wide variety of subjects. Colleagues noted that he would often stop by their office to discuss some minor topic that might go on for more than an hour. He will be missed by all who knew him.

- Dr. Conrad Wagner

(A memorial will be held in Dr. Ong's home shortly; details are still pending.)