Obituary: Jim Hanson (1937-2018)

Professor Jim Hanson has died suddenly at the age of 81. He made major contributions to the study of naturally occurring organic compounds, to the teaching of chemistry, nationally and internationally at university level, and to the development and reputation of the University of Sussex.

He went to school in London during the Second World War and in 1950 travelled with his family to New Zealand, where his father, a meteorologist, had a posting. When he came back to the UK, he graduated with a first class degree from Oxford, then worked at the ICI Akers Laboratory (The Frythe) on the gibberellins, a group of plant growth promoters, extracted from a fungus infecting rice plants in Japan. He left Akers in 1963 to complete a PhD degree with the Nobel laureate Sir Derek Barton at Imperial College, and came to the then new University of Sussex in 1964.

He continued his work on the gibberellins at Sussex, and extended it to cover a variety of related terpenes, steroids and other naturally occurring compounds. In studies of how one class of terpenes are synthesised in nature his group showed how the folding of a single biological precursor gave rise to a wide variety of different products. Work on the biosynthesis of the gibberellin plant hormones led to an understanding of the complex pathway to these compounds.

When it was discovered that mevalonic acid was a precursor of both steroids and terpenes, Jim built a friendship with John Cornforth at Shell and this may have prompted the future Nobel Prizewinner to come to Sussex as Royal Society Professor.

Jim and his students also studied fungal biotransformations. They showed that, in two fungi, a mammalian, rather than a plant pathway is followed, and that modifications of steroids can sometimes be made without recourse to chemical methods.

Jim was a deeply committed teacher. Over 50 years, hundreds of those studying chemistry, medicinal chemistry and biochemistry were inspired by his enthusiasm. He was particularly interested in laboratory classes and spent many hours developing exercises that allowed students both to perfect their techniques and to experience at first hand the thrill of discovering something new.

He became a diligent assessor for practical courses validated by the Royal Society of Chemistry and for qualifications awarded by the Chemical Society of Sri Lanka.

For many years he held the office of Sub-Dean in the School of Chemistry and Molecular Sciences, where he was responsible for student welfare and academic progress and for giving help to those in difficulty.

Jim published more than 600 papers and reviews and a range of teaching manuals and monographs. He served on the editorial boards of several journals and recently became a senior editor of the Journal of Chemical Research, where he maintained the highest standards of integrity, checking detailed experimental data to ensure that conclusions were correctly
drawn. He served on the Science and Engineering Research Council’s Biology Advisory Panel and on one of the CASE Panels.

Jim’s main interests, beside chemistry, were his family, gardening, music and the Church of England. He was organist at St James’ Ashurst for 46 years and a reserve organist at the larger church in Steyning. Each week he would think carefully about the liturgy before he chose the music for the morning service. From time to time he gave recitals to raise funds for charity, including St Barnard Hospice in Worthing. At the time of his death he was one of the churchwardens, formally responsible for the twelfth century listed building. In his eyes, his task was not simply to protect fabric but to be part of a living presence that was still active in the village after nearly 900 years.

Jim will be sorely missed by his family, friends, neighbours in Ashurst and Steyning, colleagues, students, and the world-wide community of chemists. He is survived by his wife Ann, his children Karen and Eric, and his grandchildren Melissa and Maryanne.

Professor Douglas Young and Dr David Smith