

Michael Rand, Pharmacologist, 1927 - 2002

At ease with himself and the world

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Towards the end of his life, Mike Rand ended an address with a hypothetical question. "Can anyone ask for more," he said, "than to have as a job what one would willingly do as a hobby?" The implied assumption indicates a man at ease with himself, his profession and the world at large.

There was little need for him to stress his stellar contribution to the science of pharmacology and its related disciplines, toxicology and physiology, even less to dwell on his reputation in the global scientific community.

Yet he spent a large part of his life in conference with his peers around the world. His modesty and quiet self-deprecation that served to mask his intensely private personality could not disguise the fact he was an Australian who made a difference.

"I simply fell into science," Rand said. Certainly his theatrical family background was hardly conducive to a career in academic research. His father, Jackson Allan Rand, was a British actor-manager but also a philanderer. In 1941, his actor mother, Dora Ethelbert White, left him and fled war-torn Britain to set sail, with her two little boys and a girl, for Australia.

She was a somewhat absent mother, eccentric and known as Tommy, a role she played in a Christmas pantomime. Soon after her arrival in Melbourne, Dora put her children into boarding school, joined the Women's Land Army and taught driving skills to fellow recruits.

Michael, then 14, was educated at Ivanhoe Grammar School, residing there - when necessary - during school holidays. In 1945, aged 18, he matriculated with honours. He then sent off two applications, both of which were successful. The first was to join the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan. The second was to enrol in science at the University of Melbourne. He chose science, which led to a largely unplanned, nevertheless brilliant, career in pharmacological research.

There was no educational counselling at that time and Rand had little knowledge of biochemical science, let alone the various health professions. In his spare time he became involved in university left-wing activities with the Free Thought Movement and worked at odd jobs to help with his fees. Four years later he graduated as a BSc and was accepted as a candidate for MSc studies.

He considered himself fortunate because he had concentrated on laboratory exercises to the detriment of formal study. Hands-on scientific research established a lifetime working pattern and took precedence over teaching and administration.

Rand's supervisor, George Reid, was a pioneer in researching serotonin, the hormone that induces muscular contraction, and Rand became involved in experiments comparing samples of cattle blood and the extraction of serotonin. It was painstaking work. Out of 200 litres only one gram of material was available for pharmacological investigation.

Reid was Rand's mentor and it was a poignant time for both of them. Reid suffered from malignant hypertension. Its cause was unknown. Radical surgery involving the sympathetic nervous system proved unsuccessful and he died at 37. Today his life could have been saved with more advanced drugs.



"Reid suggested I study medicine," Rand recalled, "but I had an antipathy to didactic study." Reid's tragic death did, however, result in Rand's lifelong interest in cardiovascular pharmacology.

In 1949, after graduating as MSc, Rand married Margaret Lynch. The relationship produced two children but the marriage lasted only four years. The split was bitter and Rand saw little of his children in their early years. They were happily reunited when he returned to live in Melbourne about 15 years later.

In 1957, Rand gained his doctorate at the University of Sydney under the supervision of the eminent Roland Thorpe. Here he met and married a colleague, Anne Stafford, with whom he travelled to Britain. At Oxford, where Rand pursued postgraduate studies, he collaborated with J.H. Burn in further exploration of his chosen field. Between them they expostulated the Burn-Rand hypothesis and this provided a stimulus for other researchers into the exploration of neurotransmitter mechanisms. Because of heavy alimony and maintenance expenses, times were tough financially and Rand limited himself to five shillings a day personal expenses.

In 1959, under sponsorship from the A&NZ Life Insurance Company, Rand returned briefly to Sydney to further his research into the way nerves work to control organs and tissues in the body. By 1960 he was back in England to take up a Wellcome Research Fellowship at the London School of Pharmacy. Anne assisted in this work, and with William Bowman and Geoffrey West as co-authors he wrote the Textbook of Pharmacology (1968, 1980).

By 1964, aged 36, Rand had achieved outstanding success in original research and was offered the inaugural Chair of Pharmacology at the University of Melbourne. In 1965, he arrived home to find the old pharmacology department in a sorry state. "The morale of the staff was at a low ebb," he wrote. "Accommodation was squalid and unkempt, and the equipment was either obsolete or inadequate."

By his retirement 27 years later, the department had gained a worldwide reputation for excellence in research in the areas of hormone and nerve function. In addition, he had trained and nurtured researchers who contributed their knowledge to respected schools of pharmacology around the world.

In 1969, Rand became part-time chairman of the World Health Organisation and Food and Agricultural Organisation's expert committee on food additives. In 1972, he became a member of the editorial board of the European Journal of Toxicology. Between 1973 and 1986 he was editor-in-chief of Clinical and Experimental Pharmacology and Physiology.

He was president of the Australian Physiological and Pharmacological Society from 1989-91. He held an array of distinguished positions in organisations dealing with or publishing journals in the field of health and pharmacology, food additives and contaminants.

Rand's marriage to Anne was dissolved in 1970 and, in 1972, he married medical secretary Ilse Kupcs. In 1978, at Heathcote, Rand built his own house. But in 1990, disaster struck. The Rands' house burnt down on the eve of a visit to Europe. Everything was lost - books, records and scientific papers. Undaunted, the couple fulfilled their obligations and rebuilt when they returned.

The artist Leonard French recalls how Rand was responsible for overturning a state government and local council agreement to dump toxic waste at Mount Ida (now a winegrowing area). Outraged local residents called a town meeting which was graced by the minister responsible. "This tall figure strode in," French recalls. "Most of us didn't know who he was. When the minister stopped speaking, Rand identified himself, stated his qualifications and totally demolished the spurious arguments we had been fed by the government and the council." The toxic waste went elsewhere.

In 1991, Rand, aged 65, retired from his chair and became adjunct professor in the faculty of life sciences at RMIT University at Bundoora. As a measure of respect for Rand's achievements, the Society of Pharmacologists and Toxicologists inaugurated the Rand Medal. This is awarded biennially to a scientist who has made an outstanding contribution to clinical or experimental pharmacology or toxicology.

In 1999 Rand was appointed president of the South-East Asian/Western Pacific Federation of Pharmacologists.

In 2000 it became necessary for the Rands to adopt Ilse's granddaughter (from a previous marriage), the 2-year-old Bonnie. Rand delighted in his renewed role as a father and took great pleasure in building her a tree house.

In his last years, Michael Rand developed renal dysfunction necessitating the use of a dialysis machine. He died peacefully at home when treatment was no longer effective. His wife, his children, Madeleine and Joshua, his granddaughter, Bonnie, and his brother, Stephen, survive him.

Philip Jones

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This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/06/04/1022982678179.html>