

DR JAMES RAVENTOS

James Raventos, who died aged 77 on 23rd December, 1982, was completely dedicated to experimental work in the laboratory and remained so until he retired. His idea of bliss was a reasonably well equipped laboratory, a personal assistant whom he had selected and trained, two others to help, and an anaesthetic to study. And in his operation technique he was superb – neat, meticulous and unfussed.

Raventos came to the U.K. on a Spanish Government scholarship in 1935 to work with A.J. Clarke at Edinburgh, but the Spanish Civil War which broke out in 1936 brought about the loss of his Government and his scholarship. When C.M. Scott, senior lecturer with Clarke, elected to join I.C.I. in 1938 to form a Biological Research Department, he took Raventos with him.

His great achievement was the recognition of the potential of halothane. Scientists at what was then the General Chemicals Division of I.C.I. (now included in Mond Division) believed that an acceptable non-inflammatory inhalation anaesthetic could be found in 'the chloroform series' if chlorine atoms were substituted by fluorine. It was new chemistry and often difficult (first time!) and sometimes only small quantities of a new compound could be given to Raventos to assess. His mastery of pharmacological techniques enabled him to sort the compounds out – those that could be immediately discarded from those that required a second look – with astonishing, and as it turned out, justified assurance.

The great advance in anaesthesia made by the discovery of halothane was quickly recognised world-wide, and Raventos was called upon to lecture in many countries. Eventually, several honours were bestowed upon him. Manchester medical circles, where he was so well-liked and respected, elected him for a term as President of their Medical Society; the University of Barcelona where he had been a student and a teacher founded a Raventos Prize to be awarded annually; he was given, jointly with Dr Charles Suckling who had synthesized halothane, the Scott Prize, an award from a Philadelphian trust honouring great medical achievements; and finally, a unique honour was bestowed upon him – the Board of the Faculty of Anaesthetists of the Royal College of Surgeons travelled to Alderley Park in August, 1981 to make him an honorary fellow.

D.G.D.