



Professor PIET DE SOMER

Obituary

The death of PIET DE SOMER, Professor of Microbiology and Rector of the Catholic University of Leuven, on June 17, 1985, at the age of 68 is a great loss, keenly felt by his fellow scientists. He was one of the pioneers in the field of antibiotic and viral research. He served on the editorial board of this journal for 17 years.

PIET DE SOMER was born December 22, 1917, in Niel, near Antwerp. He studied at the Catholic University of Leuven, where he obtained the degree of Dr. Medicine in 1942. He was nominated associate professor in 1955. He became prorector of the Flemish section of the University of Louvain, and was appointed as rector of the University of Leuven, after the separation of the bilingual University into two Universities. He was re-elected as rector in 1971, 1976 and 1981.

P. DE SOMER began his scientific work at the same University in the Laboratory of Bacteriology under Professor R. BRUYNOGHE. For his studies on the Rhesus factor, which had been discovered in the USA, but which was little known in Europe due to the wartime conditions, he was awarded in 1945 a prize of the Royal Academy of Medicine. At that time he shifted his research to the field of antibiotics. Together with C. DE DUVE, who later obtained success and fame in the field of biochemistry, he studied with very limited means and primitive equipment the production of penicillin. This led to construction of a small fermentation plant for a new pharmaceutical company RIT, in Genval, Belgium. Although he obtained some information concerning fermentation during a short stay at the Connaught Laboratories in Toronto, Canada, during the winter 1946~1947, very many problems had to be solved to obtain a regular production of penicillin. At the end of 1947, crystalline penicillin sodium was obtained and commercial production was underway. In 1950, a larger plant was built for RIT, which was enlarged in 1958, and which is still the only antibiotic producing facility in Belgium. RIT became part of Smith, Kline and French in 1959, and now is called Smith Kline-RIT.

Research in the field of antibiotics was further carried out at the University of Leuven; fermentation conditions for chlortetracycline, discovery in 1953 of griseomycin (a macrolide) and in 1954 of virginiamycin. The last product, which belongs to the group of the streptogramins, is now an important animal feed additive. In the field of β -lactam antibiotics, the semi-synthetic penicillin, clometocillin (1962) should be mentioned.

In 1954, research in the field of virology was started in the newly built research institute, the Rega Institute. First, an inactivated poliomyelitis vaccine, and later an oral vaccine was developed. The application of these vaccines allowed Belgium to be the first country in the world to be free from poliomyelitis. This achievement

was followed by the development of a vaccine against rubella, which was available in 1968. At the same time fundamental research in virology was performed, especially on the mode of action and the formation of interferon. Numerous products also were examined as antivirals, and some nucleoside analogues with strong anti-herpetic activity were found. The discovery of the influence of virginiamycin on the intestinal flora also led to the study of intestinal bacteria responsible for transformations of cholesterol, bile and fatty acids.

In his position of rector of the University, P. DE SOMER proved to be a great leader and an excellent organizer of scientific research. He also provided the University with an efficient administrative structure.

He was the recipient of numerous honours including the membership of the Academy of Medicine of Belgium in 1955, several Belgian scientific awards, Dr. hon. causa of the Kyung Hee University of Seoul, University of Ghent, Notre Dame University (Indiana), the University of Santo Thomas, Manilla, and St. Louis University, Baguio, Philippines.

P. DE SOMER will be remembered by his many collaborators in the Rega Institute, his colleagues at the University and his many friends all over the world for his authority in science management, his clairvoyance in new alleys of scientific research and his critical and sometimes witty evaluation of things of life.

Prof. H. VANDERHAEGHE
(University of Leuven)