

Obituary

Johan C. Kraak (1940–2004)



Dr. Johan C. Kraak passed away, at the age of 64, on Friday, 20 December 2004. Johan was my colleague for more than 25 years, but more importantly, he was my closest friend. Few people can appreciate better than I what a fine person we have lost. I am grateful that I can devote a few words in this journal to him.

Johan did not follow a regular academic career. Not having the opportunity to follow an academic education, he started off, at the age of 17, in chemistry at the University of Amsterdam in a very modest position: apprentice laboratory assistant. His humble duties included cleaning the tables and tools in the laboratory for the scientific workers and the students, one of the latter being me at that time. From this position he worked himself up. Following numerous evening and weekend courses, he made his way to the level of senior laboratory assistant, then to the masters degree and finally, in 1974, under the supervision of one of the pioneers of HPLC, Professor J.F.K. Huber, he graduated to Ph.D. on a thesis entitled “Liquid–liquid chromatography involving chemical reactions in the stationary phase”.

This career description only takes a few words, but great devotion and perseverance were needed to accomplish this achievement, during a time that he had also to take care of a young family with two children, with all the ups and downs that come with such a responsibility. His strong character made this all possible.

After 1974, when Josef (Professor J.F.K. Huber) decided to return to Austria, the two of us were faced with the task of keeping the separations group together and maintaining the quality of the work initiated under Josef’s supervision. It was during that time that I learned to appreciate the strength and qualities of Johan’s character. Loyal, friendly, hard-working and above all honest and modest. He played a key role in much, if not all, of the research done by the two of us and by Dr. Wim Th. Kok, who later joined the group. It is good to summarize some of Johan’s scientific accomplishments.

Long before the totally porous microsized particles became commonplace in HPLC, he was able to prepare efficient columns with such particles. The technique of plunger-packing, developed by Josef and Johan (later superseded by slurry packing) was well known around the world. His contributions to the development of HPLC were soon recognized internationally, and he was invited by Professor B.L. Karger to Boston, MA, USA and by Professor G. Schill to Uppsala, Sweden, where he made, as always, very good friends. At our own university laboratory he produced a long series of contributions on the exploitation of chemical reactions in HPLC, including extensive ion-pair and ion-exchange studies. He was an early pioneer in the application of HPLC to the analysis of body fluids for pharmaceutical residues and endogenous compounds.

In this and later work he chose his topics in the best scientific manner: where knowledge was insufficient and new horizons could open up. Thus he embarked on hydrodynamic chromatography, on the study of protein binding by HPLC and capillary zone electrophoresis (CZE), and on open tubular liquid chromatography.

In addition to this research work he was always productive in organizing educational activities. He organized a series of HPLC and CZE courses at our university, and took the initiative for a long-term cooperation in analytical chemistry with the University of Hanoi, Vietnam.

His international reputation grew over the years. Partly this was caused by the proficiency of his work, but his personality made him much beloved by many. He was known at international meetings as the center of the “Dutch Mafia”, because a group of scientists from The Netherlands

and elsewhere always gathered around him. I was always impressed by how people enjoyed seeing him at these meetings.

Johan spent the last part of his life in France. As he had always said, he wanted to begin a new life as a wine farmer, and he did so. It is too sad that he and his wife Thuy could enjoy that for only a couple of years, and harvest only one crop of grapes.

While his scientific contributions inevitably will fade away from the memory of separation scientists, many of us will still remember his unique personality and character: energetic, warm, honest and modest. We lost a unique friend and scientist. Our sympathy goes to those he left behind: his wife Thuy, his former wife Willy and the children.

*Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Hans Poppe