Robert Freedman (1946–2017)

Professor Robert Freedman was a highly admired and loved biochemist who had recently celebrated his golden wedding anniversary to his wife Penny. He was Chairman of the Biochemical Society from 1996–1999.

Robert was educated at the City of London School, and, at 17, won an Exhibition to Merton College to read chemistry, where we met. He gained a first class degree with ease in spite of appalling handwriting and spending a disproportionate amount of time acting!

After his doctorate with (Sir) George Radda, he moved to University College London in 1969 to work with Bob Rabin and it was here that he developed his interest in protein disulphide isomerase – a crucial element in determining how proteins fold and therefore how they act.

At this time, he was appointed biochemistry consultant to New Scientist magazine, and he made regular contributions to this publication.

In 1971, he joined the recently opened Biological Laboratory at the University of Kent. Over the next few years under the founding Director of the Laboratory, Ken Stacey, he established a strong reputation for research and teaching for the nascent department.

In 1989, he was awarded a Personal Chair in biochemistry, and became Director of the Biological Laboratory. During the next five years he successfully steered the biosciences department through its first research assessment in 1992. This managerial experience whetted Robert's appetite for senior management and two years later he became Pro-Vice Chancellor for research. He did an outstanding job leading the University's RAE2001 submission. He was finally made Deputy Vice-Chancellor before a chance meeting with Sir Howard Dalton led to his move to the University of Warwick in 2002.

One aspect of Robert's approach to science that was immediately evident was his commitment not only to do world class biochemistry, but also to nurture the next generation of biochemists. There was very much a family feel to his research group, with his staff and students admiring Robert, as a mentor and a friend.

In the early years in Canterbury, he set about establishing a research programme which over the next 40 years would see him internationally recognized for his research in the field of protein biochemistry. In particular, his seminal work on the enzyme protein disulphide isomerase (or PDI for short) was widely recognized as a major contribution to our understanding of how proteins are able to take up their correct three dimensional shapes in cells. His interest in PDI continued long after he retired from his academic post at Warwick and he remained engaged with colleagues at both Kent and Warwick. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Kent in 2010.

In addition to numerous highly cited research articles, his work also had impact in the field of biotechnology. He was among the first to explore cell engineering strategies to improve the efficiency with which high value biopharmaceutical products can be produced in cultured cells. This led to the development of a patented technology which was licensed to several biopharmaceutical companies, and which continues to generate revenue.

He had a forensic intellect, and combined this with restless enthusiasm, articulacy, boundless charm, total loyalty and reliability. Such combinations are rare, and it was no wonder that he was in frequent demand to join committees.

During his time as Chairman of the Biochemical Society he was catalytic in persuading the life science community to cooperate more closely. This ultimately led to the birth of the Royal Society of Biology. At his death he remained on the Audit Committee of the Biochemical Society.

He also served on several committees of the BBSRC, including its Council and he managed its Protein Engineering Programme for several years. In addition to this, he had been recently been awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship to support his research into early women biochemists.

He is survived by his wife Penny, daughters Zoe and Genny, and by his siblings Naomi and Peter.

Alan Malcolm