In Memoriam: John L. Emmerson

Dr John Lynn Emmerson, Distinguished Lilly Research Scholar and long-time member of the Society, passed away on June 27, 2012 in Portland, Oregon, following a lengthy convalescence due to an automobile accident and a series of strokes. He was 78.

Born in the southwestern Indiana town of Owensville on November 21, 1933, Dr Emmerson liked to return frequently to the area to visit with family and boyhood friends. John graduated from Owensville High School in 1951 and then joined the Navy, attaining the rank of Petty Officer 2nd Class. After being discharged from the Navy, John enrolled in the School of Pharmacy at Purdue University and received a BS degree in 1958. In 1957, he married Karen Nethery, a student in Pharmacy who went into practice while John went on to graduate school. John received his Master’s degree in Pharmacology in 1959, followed by a PhD in 1961. His mentor, Dr Tom S. Miya, was a founding member of the Society of Toxicology and a noted toxicologist in his own right. Dr Miya was the president of SOT from 1979 to 1980.

Dr Emmerson began his professional career at Eli Lilly and Company in 1961 where he was hired as a senior pharmacologist by Drs R. C. Anderson and K. K. Chen, both widely respected pharmacologists at the time. Dr Emmerson was the 35th member of the Toxicology Department, which was housed in a single building in Indianapolis along with chemists, pharmacologists, clinical physicians, and drug formulation experts. During these early years, Dr Emmerson gained a vital understanding of what a daunting task it is to discover and bring forth a new therapeutic agent, given the high probability of failure. But the enduring lesson he absorbed and passed on to his colleagues was an absolutely essential component for success: the rapid and faithful transmission of scientific data among all of the scientific areas.

When it became apparent that longer and more elaborate studies were needed to support new candidate pharmaceuticals than what could be conducted in the Indianapolis facility, Drs Anderson and Emmerson led an effort to design a new building for Toxicology in Greenfield, Indiana, some 23 mi east of the Indianapolis Lilly Corporate center. The new laboratory opened in 1962 with a staff that had grown to 50 individuals.

Dr Emmerson left Lilly in the 1965–1966 school year to serve as an Associate Professor of Toxicology in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at Purdue University, but he soon learned that the academic life was not for him; so, he returned to Lilly in 1966. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed the Head of the Metabolism Department which was later renamed Biochemical Toxicology in recognition of the mechanistic research the group was asked to pursue. By 1973, John’s activities were consumed by managerial duties when he was asked to also be the head of the Pathology Department and the two departments were combined. In 1977, he became Director of Toxicology Studies, which, combined with the Metabolism and Pathology Departments, encompassed nearly all of us who were in Toxicology at the time. Despite his demanding managerial responsibilities, John remained an ardent scientist and mentor who particularly favored coaching and nurturing younger scientists in the art of writing concise and lucid study reports. It was always his strong belief that any report submitted to a regulatory agency be of absolute top quality, taking the reader through the rationale for why the study needed to be conducted, the doses that were selected, a synopsis of previous studies and their findings in conjunction with a thoughtful interpretation of the results, linking findings of this study together with other nonclinical or clinical findings that might be relevant.

John felt strongly that such reports should be reviewed by all components that contributed to the work and that they should attest by signature that they agreed with the interpretation of the findings. Even though this would lengthen the overall process, he believed this approach delivered a more comprehensive, higher quality report and also reflected the overarching philosophy of the company.

For many of us at Eli Lilly and Company, John was an important scientific mentor and colleague in our professional lives—a role which he generously played for all of the toxicologists he brought into the company. John was both an astute scientist and a great communicator who could distill the essence of multidisciplinary toxicologic findings and assess their significance to human safety. These attributes made him a role model to all of us in Toxicology.
John was a strong proponent of teamwork involving multiple scientific disciplines when confronted with difficult toxicological problems. He had a wide knowledge of drug discovery, development, manufacturing, and registration which enabled him to address toxicology issues from all sectors.

John was a respected and trusted representative of Toxicology to the management of the research community at Lilly. His even temperament, insight, and willingness to listen to other points of view were hallmarks of his leadership style. John took a genuine interest in the development of his staff members and recognized their efforts in building the scientific reputation of the department within and outside of the company. It can be said that “Lilly Toxicology was the House that John Emmerson built.”

Dr Emmerson served on a number of SOT committees, including the Tox-80’s and Tox-90’s commissions, the program committee, the committee on accreditation of toxicology facilities, and one on Good Laboratory Practices. He rose to become the Society’s Vice-President elect in 1990, Vice-President in 1991, and President of the Society in 1992–1993. He also represented the National Agricultural Chemistry Association in several public hearings and was on the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association Drug Safety subsection steering committee from 1981 to 1989, Vice-Chairman from 1984 to 1986, and its chairman from 1986 to 1988. Dr Emmerson was on the editorial board of Toxicology and Applied Pharmacology where he was an associate editor from 1978 to 1980. He was a member of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences where he served on various environmental and toxicology sciences committees, a post which he retained well after retiring from Eli Lilly and Company.

In recognition for his efforts and scientific contributions, Dr Emmerson was promoted to a Lilly Research Fellow in 1984 while maintaining his management position as a Director of Toxicology. Dr Emmerson continued to be recognized for his extensive contributions and was named a Distinguished Lilly Research Scholar in 1991, the highest scientific position within the company. Dr Emmerson was only one of two such scientists to have achieved this position at the time. John retired from Eli Lilly and Company in 1995 after nearly 33 years of scientific achievement. As retirement approached, John’s own words describe his legacy best: “In the last several years I have spent most of my time teaching, listening, counseling, asking questions, and perhaps mentoring the younger scientists as they have joined us and grown in scientific stature. That’s been the most fun part of the job.”

John’s personal interests were golf, literature, and gardening. He loved to play golf with his friends on a regular basis and was always promoting the division’s annual golf outing and seasonal golf league where he played weekly. He was also a member of the Greenfield County Club’s Board of Directors. He loved to read classical novels and collected Heritage Club and Folio Society books. One of John’s favorite pursuits was to visit book stores wherever he went to add to his vast book collection. John was a skilled and consummate gardener with a green thumb. He maintained an impressive floral garden at his home in Greenfield and nurtured a large vegetable garden at a friend’s nearby country home.

John is survived by his wife Karen, son James L. Emmerson, and four grandchildren. John was preceded in death by his son, Dr Michael S. Emmerson, who was an ophthalmologist in Bloomington, Illinois. John will be missed by all whose lives he touched.