

PROFESSOR RAPHAEL MECHOULAM — MEDICAL CANNABIS RESEARCH

Statement

HON DR BRIAN WALKER (East Metropolitan) [6.33 pm]: Before I commence my statement, I want to stand here in support of Hon Pierre Yang and Hon Sandra Carr because you are my brother and sister, and you reflect entirely the belief I have and, I am sure, share with everyone in this chamber.

On 9 March, one of the leading lights in cannabis research left this earth. We in the Legalise Cannabis Party Australia are mourning, together with his family, friends and colleagues, Professor Raphael Mechoulam—the father of cannabis research. He was born in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1930. His father was a physician and his mother was an educated lady, educated in Berlin; they were a Sephardic Jewish family and lived in some comfort until, of course, the catastrophe of the Holocaust. His father was incarcerated in a concentration camp but survived. After the Nazi regime fell, the family migrated to Israel, where Professor Mechoulam lived for the rest of his life. He studied and spent the majority of his life as a researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

He is best known for his discovery in 1964 of THC—the active ingredient in cannabis that produces the plant’s well-known psychoactive effects. But how did he manage to get his hands on the material to study cannabis? He went to the local repository of cannabis—that is, the local police station—and asked very politely, “Can I have some cannabis for research, please?” Having reassured them that he was a researcher and not a wanted criminal, he was given five kilograms of cannabis to take home. He did not have a car, so he went back to the university in a bus. One can imagine how attracted the people in the bus were to the smell of five kilograms of cannabis; I understand they were quite interested in his carry-on luggage! Surviving that was, I think, testament to his persuasive abilities and his dedication to advancing science.

He was also well known for his passion for education—something that the teachers in this chamber will be well aware of. He was known for his ability to explain complex scientific concepts in a way that was easy for anyone to understand, from his students to the general public. That is the mark of a great teacher—someone who masters a subject and can express it in simple terms. His enthusiasm was contagious.

He gained a Master of Science in biochemistry from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a PhD from the Weizmann Institute with a thesis on the chemistry of steroids. He also undertook postdoctoral studies at the Rockefeller Institute in New York. He was on the scientific staff of the Weizmann Institute before moving to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he became the Lionel Jacobsen Professor of Medicinal Chemistry, rector and pro-rector. He was elected a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and was one of the founding members of the International Association for Cannabinoid Medicines and the International Cannabinoid Research Society. He was a giant among researchers.

Perhaps Professor Mechoulam’s most significant achievement was his impact in the field of medical cannabis. His work laid the foundation for a number of cannabis-based treatments for a variety of conditions, including epilepsy, chronic pain, nausea, autism, ADHD and PTSD. He has changed countless lives. A recent trip to Israel showed the extent of research that stems from his groundbreaking work that will, I think, transform the world.

He is best known for his work in the isolation, structure elucidation and total synthesis of delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC. He is also known for the isolation and identification of the endogenous cannabinoids anandamide, which I certainly well remember, and 2-arachidonoyl glycerol—which I do not tell people about, because I cannot pronounce it! He worked with his students, postdoctoral students and collaborators and elucidated how we make our own cannabinoids. That goes on to the fact that he elucidated the endocannabinoid system in 1996, yet it still is not taught in our medical schools.

This is groundbreaking work. As I said, he was a giant among men. As we say goodbye to Professor Raphael Mechoulam, we honour his memory and his incredible legacy. May his memory be a blessing to all who knew him, and to those whose lives he touched through his work: Y’hi zichro baruch.