

Obituary: Dr. Michael A. Mayo (1944–2008)

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Dr. Mike A. Mayo

Mike Mayo, who was active on the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) for almost two decades, died on December 31st 2008. Mike was born in London, educated at Nottingham University and spent the whole of his postgraduate career at the Scottish Horticultural Research Institute (later renamed Scottish Crop Research Institute, SCRI), Dundee, UK. In 1993–1999 he served as Chair of the Plant Virus Subcommittee—with SCRI virologists on 13 of the 20 Study Groups! In 1999–2005 he was Joint Secretary (with Claude Fauquet) of the ICTV Executive Committee (EC) and he was a co-Editor of the Sixth to Eighth Reports of the ICTV, which recorded information about, and relationships among, the thousands of viruses that infect organisms of all kinds. The last two of

these volumes ran to more than 1,000 pages, and all three involved coordinating the efforts of hundreds of virologists. Mike also wrote or co-authored numerous articles on taxonomic or nomenclatural matters, mostly informing the virological community about ICTV decisions, taxonomic advances or points under discussion.

Virus taxonomy and nomenclature can arouse strong feelings and there were several knotty problems to be solved during Mike's period of office. His extensive knowledge of viruses and of the rules governing their taxonomy and nomenclature, his hard work, wise advice and calming presence were a major asset to the EC, helping much to be achieved and making him many friends. Warm tributes from numerous EC colleagues include phrases such as 'a grand force in the ICTV', 'a very savvy fellow in the world of the Biocode', 'contributed so much to our efforts', 'a terrific plant virologist and a great guy to know and work with at every level', 'got through an enormous workload', 'knew the ICTV Rules and Statutes backwards ...and understood how they should be applied in the light of precedent', 'served the virological community in many ways', 'enthusiasm, patience and good humour', 'genial and unassuming', 'calm voice of wisdom, experience and sound judgement', 'had a great deal of respect for him as a virologist, a dedicated Secretary for ICTV, and a wonderful man to chat with over a meal', and 'always appreciated his frank advice'. He was elected a Life Member of ICTV in 2005.

Mike was indeed an unassuming man and not all those who knew him through the ICTV may have been aware of the research achievements that made him a distinguished plant virologist. Soon after he joined SHRI in 1968, he became a key member of the small group studying Raspberry ringspot virus and other members of the genus *Nepovirus*. Their coat proteins and RNAs were

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characterized, their particle structure deduced, the bipartite nature of their genomes discovered and the control of numerous molecular or biological properties attributed to one or the other genome part. Some cultures of the genus *Nepovirus* were found to contain satellite RNAs—molecules that were replicated only in virus-infected cells—and Mike studied these and became an authority on viral satellite RNAs in general. He showed that the small circular molecules (virusoids) reported from cultures of the genus *Sobemovirus* were satellite RNAs and he was a member of the team which showed that resistance of plants to Cucumber mosaic virus could be created by transforming their DNA with a DNA copy of a benign satellite RNA of the virus.

Later Mike turned his attention to other viruses being studied at SCRI. He sequenced the RNA of Potato leafroll virus and discovered numerous other molecular and biological features of this and other members of the genus *Polerovirus*, in some instances explaining the molecular mechanisms underlying the biological properties. He established the distinctive genome strategies of Raspberry bushy dwarf virus and Parsnip yellow fleck virus, which then became the names of the type species of the genera *Idaeovirus* and *Sequivirus*, respectively. Several other genus names resulted from his taxonomic analyses. He also

studied several viruses from developing countries, particularly Indian peanut clump virus (in the genus *Pecluvirus*), and was especially pleased with the results of a spin-off project in which he devised a sensitive quantitative assay for aflatoxin. This is a mycotoxin that contaminates some batches of peanut seeds, especially in India, with serious effects on human consumers, and with the death of poultry.

Much of Mike's research was done in collaboration with others who had complementary expertise: colleagues at SCRI or virologists in other countries. An early sabbatical year in France led to continued collaboration and enduring friendships. Visitors from Germany, Japan, India, USA and elsewhere worked in his laboratory and became friends. He became known to the wider virological community, wrote influential reviews, gave many invited talks, and served as co-Editor of virology journals. His achievements made a strong contribution to establishing the international reputation of SCRI as a centre for plant virus research.

In character, Mike was lively and full of ideas, good company, a dedicated scientist and a fine colleague with a strong sense of right and wrong. He enjoyed life and was proud of his family. He will be remembered for his numerous scientific achievements, influence for good, and friendship.

His wife and two sons survive him.