

OBITUARY



Ayhan S. Demir (1950–2012)

Professor Ayhan S. Demir (1950–2012), a great and inspiring teacher of organic chemistry as well as an outstanding researcher, has died after suffering a heart attack at his home in Davutlar village, in the district of Kuşadası, on 24 June 2012, at the peak of his career and to the great distress of his family, friends, and scientific colleagues. He was born on 10 October 1950 in Tahtakıran village, in the district of Göle (Kars Province). He was the third child of a primary school teacher, Mustafa, and his wife Peruze. He grew up in Kars and was first educated at the local primary school until his father moved to Sivas as an Inspector of Primary Education. In 1961, he finished his primary school education and proceeded to middle school (1961–1964). With the aim of educating young people, he studied at Sivas Teachers' College (1964–1967), worked in Şarkışla (Konakyazı village) as a primary school teacher (1967–1968), and then studied at the Chemistry–Physics–Biology Department of the Konya Institute of Education, from which he graduated with honors in 1971. He was appointed as a chemistry/physics teacher at Kazım Karabekir Teachers' College in Kars, where he served with distinction until 1974. Following a 1-year German language tutoring program he moved to Germany with the aim of studying chemistry. For his graduate studies, he attended the University of Bonn (Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms Universität, Institut für Organische Chemie und Biochemie), where he earned his MSc, with honors, in chemistry in 1981. In the meantime, while progressing toward earning his degree in chemistry, he enlisted in the Turkish Army in 1976 (July–October) and served for 4 months as a reserve officer. After his discharge, he returned to his study of chemistry at the University of Bonn, graduated (Diplomarbeit) with honors in 1981, and subsequently undertook a PhD under the supervision of Professor Dieter Enders between 1981 and 1985. Toward the end of his doctoral studies, he was united in marriage to Angelika Irmer on 31 August 1984 in Neunkirchen (Germany). He then moved to the USA and engaged in postdoctoral research at the Department of Chemistry of the University of Kentucky (Lexington) with Professor David S. Watt for the period of 1986–1987. Returning to Turkey in 1987, he accepted an offer in Ankara to become a member of the Department of Chemistry at Middle East Technical University (METU). His rise through METU's academic ranks was rapid and well deserved, culminating in his appointment as Professor in 1993, where he served until his death in 2012.

Professor Ayhan S. Demir held a visiting professorship at Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms Universität, Institut für Organische Chemie und Biochemie, Bonn (1990–1991). During 1996, he took a leave of absence to be a Visiting Professor at the Institut de Chimie des Substances Naturelles, CNRS Gif-Sur Yvette, in France. Next, he again crossed the Atlantic, where he was twice appointed as a Visiting Professor at the University of Kentucky's College of Pharmacy as a prestigious Fulbright Scholar, working on lipophilic camptothecins of value in cancer therapy (1997) and topoisomerase inhibitors (1998). Returning to Europe, he then held the position of Visiting Professor at the Institute of Biotechnology, Jülich, Germany, as an Alexander von Humboldt Scholar, in 1999. He worked on the synthesis of biologically active compounds using biotechnology, rather than conventional reagent-based methodology. Finally, in 2000, he spent several months (April–August) as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Institut für Organische Chemie at RWTH-Aachen (Germany).

As a professor and a chemist, Ayhan rapidly acquired a reputation for enthusiasm and inquisitive energy. He quickly recognized the importance of synthesizing bioactive compounds via biotechnology-based methods. His intuitive ability, intellectual capacity, and training allowed him to perform research in various areas of chemistry and established him as a frequent consultant to industry. His early research interests ranged widely to include mechanistic and synthetic organic chemistry, which was extended to include asymmetric synthesis, new methodology, and new scaffolds and catalysts that can be used in organic reactions, biotechnology, and enzyme-catalyzed synthesis as well as in polymer and therapeutic chemistry. More recently, with the renewed emphasis on the value of “green chemistry” in the search for new medicinal substances, he successfully focused on enzyme-catalyzed organic synthesis. Ayhan's interests and knowledge ensured that the interdisciplinary nature of his research endeavors would be successful and his international orientation was exemplified by his collaboration with a range of research groups across the globe. He built up a worldwide network of collaborations, and his expertise was recognized by invitations to speak at international scientific meetings. He is credited with making a major contribution to Turkish organic chemistry, not only through his research but also through inviting leading chemists to travel to Turkey to lecture and take part in meetings. In February 2002, Ayhan joined the editorial board of the Turkish Journal of Chemistry. He was appointed Editor-in-Chief in January 2009 and he remained in this position until his death, turning the TJC into a more dynamic, widely read journal. His success as editor owed much to his dominant personality, to his irresistible enthusiasm, and to his readiness to bear the heat of criticism.

Throughout his life, he belonged to many professional and social organizations, which reflected his academic successes and interests in science and art. He had an ardent love for animals (especially cats). Yet, to the many people who knew Ayhan, his most remarkable accomplishments were human and personal. In his nearly 2 decades of unparalleled service to METU, he was a mentor to dozens of METU students and an inspiration to even more. He was a true teacher who made everyone he worked with achieve more than they thought themselves capable of. He had the ability to make complicated problems seem simple. He could go straight to the heart of a scientific problem and present his explanation in a manner accessible to everyone. He devoted his life to serving as a role model, spreading his views with inexorable logic and an exceptional strength. He was a great narrator, with enormous charm, an expert on reading the future in coffee grinds; and when too many were demanding, especially during the soirées at chemistry meetings, he offered a calming, logical influence on his colleagues. He was the finest company one could wish for.

Weakened by a heart attack, although he appeared for a while to be recovering satisfactorily, a recurrence of the difficulty weakened him further and he departed despite all efforts to keep him alive. Following his first heart attack he knew he was not alone; he knew he was loved. Ayhan was held in the highest esteem by every person who knew him and will be sorely missed by all of them. I feel privileged to have known him.

Prof Dr Simeon ARSENIYADIS
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