

Van 't Hoff Institute for Molecular Sciences



Prof. W. Nico Speckamp. Photo: HIMS.

In Memoriam W. Nico Speckamp (1933-2018)

Professor emeritus of Synthetic Organic Chemistry

15 January 2018

On 10 January, organic chemist W. Nico Speckamp passed away at the age of 84. Speckamp spent a large part of his life at the UvA and was a professor from 1980 to 1998. His work on the stereoselective synthesis of natural products and biologically active compounds was world-renowned.

Willem Nico Speckamp was born on St. Nicholas' name day, 6 December, 1933, in the historic center of Amsterdam near the *Nicolaaskerk*. He studied chemistry at the UvA and graduated in 1959. In 1964 he obtained his doctorate with Professor Huisman on a thesis on the total synthesis of azasteroids. Nico became a lecturer in 1971 and was full professor from 1980-1998.

Organic synthesis

Nico Speckamp was a synthetic organic chemist in heart and soul. The research of his group became well known with the discovery of the selective reduction of succinimides around 1975. It was the start of a whole series of articles on the stereoselective synthesis of natural products and biologically active compounds, in particular alkaloids.

The research attracted much interest and led to over 15 foreign lectures per year. Nico's fame led to his election as president of the prestigious Bürgenstock conference in Switzerland in 1988. In 1995, Nico received the Holleman Prize from the KNAW, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Other research led to the development of a promising remedy for bladder cancer. The patent led to substantial revenues that enabled the purchase of a 400 MHz NMR machine. This is still of great value for structure determination at the Van 't Hoff Institute for Molecular Sciences at the UvA.

Groundbreaking work

Nico was an enthusiastic teacher who trained many students in his beloved field of organic synthesis. He was (co-) supervisor of 40 PhD students which was reflected in the title of his valedictory lecture in October 1998: *'Theme and Variations for Forty Soloists'*. As a passionate and persevering scientist, he delivered groundbreaking work and put the Amsterdam synthesis group on the map internationally.

In his limited free time, Nico Speckamp was often in France, his passion, preferably around his *cabanon* in an olive grove in Provence. He had hoped to have more time for this since his retirement, but, unfortunately, he experienced a declining health. Nico Speckamp remains in our grateful memory for his loud voice and outspoken opinion, but above all for the great dedication to his profession. Our sympathy goes out to his wife Els, his children and grandchildren.

Henk Hiemstra

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