Interview: Tom Spurling

Tom Spurling has over 30 years of experience in R&D in the areas of applied organic chemistry and industrial technology, and has been outspoken on the role and purpose of public sector R&D in Australia’s future prosperity. He discusses these issues with Helmut Hügel.

In a press release on 5 May Senator Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, announced the appointment of Professor Thomas Spurling as a part-time member of the CSIRO board. His long association with CSIRO started in 1969, leading to his appointments as Chief of the Division of Chemicals and Polymers in 1989 and Chief of the Division of Molecular Science in 1997.

Conratulations Tom, on behalf of all RACI members, on your appointment to the CSIRO Board. What were some of your achievements/highlights during your time at CSIRO?

I have been associated with CSIRO for more than half of my life. (I worked for CSIRO for 33 years (1969-2003), was a CSIRO overseas student for one year (1965-66) and a CSIRO postgraduate student for three years (1963-65).)

I was employed by the Division of Applied Chemistry as a theoretical physical chemist and enjoyed my first decade working on the properties of gases, the statistical mechanics of surfaces and the rational design of biologically active molecules. The series of papers on surfaces that John Lane and I published between 1976 and 1983 have had more than 350 citations.

The next decade I spent in various management and advisory roles. It was while I was the Assistant Chief of the Division of Applied Organic Chemistry that CSIRO established a commercial link with DuPont in the field of crop protection chemicals. The Division of Chemicals and Polymers subsequently worked with DuPont Automotive Products. My interactions with that company were very informative and enjoyable.

I took leave without pay from CSIRO in 1985 to be Senator Gareth Evans’ Senior Private Secretary. Senator Evans was the Minister for Resources and Energy at that time. It was a great experience to work in a minister’s office.

CSIRO was then not very good at bringing people back into the organisation. I was lucky that an opportunity to work with McKinsey and Company came up within six months of my return. This was initially to look at commercialisation issues to do with minerals research and led to some work on the board’s reorganisation proposals, which led to the institute structure of CSIRO. I worked in an institute director’s office until being appointed Chief of the Division of Chemicals and Polymers in 1989.

This was at the time when CSIRO was required to increase external earnings to 30% of its total expenditure. This led, of course, to a great increase in contacts with companies both large and small, and provided some of my most enjoyable CSIRO experiences.

A question always associated with CSIRO’s dealings with private companies is ‘Did we get a good return for our investment of taxpayer’s money?’

It is a hard question to answer but I believe the Division of Chemicals and Polymers’ work with Note Printing Australia, the CRC for Eye Research and Technology, the CRC for Cardiac Technology, the CRC for Polymers and DuPont (and other companies) did bring considerable benefit to the community. My regret is that it didn’t bring more benefit.

The Division of Molecular Science, established in 1997, brought together CSIRO chemists and biologists. This was an exciting period; my regret is that I didn’t stay long enough as Chief to see the fruits of the merger.

I didn’t stay as Chief of the Division of Molecular Science because the Chief Executive at that time, Dr Malcolm McIntosh, made me an offer that I couldn’t refuse. He appointed me to lead the troubled CSIRO-LIPI project in Jakarta, Indonesia. I spent nearly three years in Jakarta from the end of 1998 to the middle of 2001. The project was declared to be successful by the World Bank (who funded it) but I still wonder if I could have done more to benefit the Indonesian scientific community.

In 2001, when I returned from Jakarta, it was not clear to me what CSIRO wanted me to do. I solved the problem by going to work at Swinburne University of Technology in 2002 as the Director of the Industrial Research Institute Swinburne and later as the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and...
Industrial Sciences. I retired from the latter position in 2005 and joined CR Wood Innovations as its Chief Executive Officer. I also work with the SUT Faculty of Life and Social Sciences as a Professor in the Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies and Society.

I am looking forward to using my experience in CSIRO, as a political advisor, in Indonesia, in academia and in various CRCs to assist the CSIRO in the next phase of its life.

Tom Spurling FRACI CChem, FTSE, FFACS is a Professor at the Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies and Society at Swinburne University of Technology and Chief Executive Officer, CRC Wood Innovations. He was President of the RACI (1987–88), of the Federation of Asian Chemical Societies (FACS, 1989–91) and of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS, 2005–07).

Helmut Hügel FRACI CChem is Associate Professor in Applied Chemistry at the School of Applied Sciences, RMIT University.