

Vale Roderick “Rod” Esdaile, Scientist: practical scientist broke new ground in his fields

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by Susan and Lucy Esdaile

Dr. Rod Esdaile, who gained an international reputation for his expertise in titanium and fibre optics, died at home in North Carlton after a long struggle with cancer that had shadowed, but not taken over his life until his last months.

He also played a leading role in die-casting in the automotive industry, which included a three-year posting as technical director with the Australian Trade Commission in Detroit in the US.

Born in Melbourne, Rod was the son of a senior navy officer who had played an active role during World War II. Rod spent his early years in Toorak and attended Wesley College; when his father retired in 1950, the family moved to Upper Beaconsfield, and he attended Dandenong High School. He did his National Service in the RAN.

Rod started his career working as a laboratory technician with the CSIRO Division of Tribophysics (later Materials Science), based at Melbourne University, where he studied part time. He obtained his bachelor's degree in physical chemistry in 1965, and the following year he married Susan Koves. They had two daughters.

Rod's groundbreaking research on fibre optics with the late Dr Graeme Ogilvy placed them at the forefront of this field internationally. In 1975, he accepted a British government contract in conjunction with the University of Glasgow, Scotland, to develop switching devices for optical fibres using titanium. His research also enabled him to complete his PhD in electrical engineering. He returned with his family to Melbourne in 1979 and he resumed working with CSIRO.

Rod continued as a consultant to many projects related to his expertise in titanium and fibre optics, including the development of the bionic ear.

His work took a new direction with research related to magnesium and its applications to die-casting in the automotive industry. In the early 1990's, he played a leading role in the establishment of the CAST Co-operative Research Centre (CRC), before the trade

commission posting in Detroit to promote and enhance automotive research and industry collaborations with the US. At the end of this assignment, Rod "retired" and set up his own consulting company in the US.

He worked tirelessly to assist Australian colleagues doing business in the US, especially those involved with magnesium research and development, the die-casting industry and former CSIRO colleagues. He was an office bearer of various industry and professional associations, including the Royal Society of Victoria. He helped organise many conferences, and presented and published numerous papers.

Always a practical scientist, Rod moved seamlessly from theory and research to shop floor applications. He and Susan, who worked in the US as an occupational therapist, returned to Melbourne at the end of 2003.

Rod was a keen and skilful house renovator, and for years he was an active member of the CSIRO Ski Club and helped to build several lodges from the 1960's to 1980's. He enjoyed inner-city living, reading extensively, attending concerts and opera and spending time at Somers where he had a large workshop and his traditional, Tasmanian-built wooden sailing dinghy.

Rod's elder daughter, Anna, predeceased him in 1993. He is survived by his wife Susan and daughter Lucy.

Friends and colleagues John Carrig, Morris Murray and Graham Wilson assisted in preparing this tribute.