IN MEMORIAM

H. Rodney Withers
(21 September 1932–25 February 2015)

H. Rodney Withers (“Rod”) died in Houston, TX, on 25 February 2015 at the age of 82 after a long struggle with a variant of Parkinson’s disease. He was a stalwart of the Radiation Research Society (RRS). He was the 31st President of the RRS (1982–1983) and gave the 25th Failla lecture in 1988. Full of typically amusing thought and sharp observations, he entitled it “Contrarian Radiobiology’s Contribution to Radiotherapy”, taking the view that a contrarian view of current concepts in radiobiology was warranted before rather than after they undergo revision. Rod was an unassuming intellectual giant who shaped the discipline of radiobiology while retaining a warm, amusing, kind and helpful personality that is greatly missed.

Rod was born in the small town in Australia called Stanthorpe and educated at the Church of England Grammar School, Brisbane and the University of Queensland (M.B., B.S., 1956). He did his internship at the Royal Brisbane Hospital in 1957, and his residency in radiotherapy and pathology at the Queensland Radium Institute and the Royal Brisbane Hospital from 1958 until 1963. Like many young Australians, he decided to travel to London and entered graduate school as a University of Queensland Gaggin Fellow. His career as a clinical scientist started when he joined the Gray Laboratory, Mt. Vernon Hospital, Middlesex from 1963 to 1965. The Gray Lab was opened in 1957 under the direction of the physicist Louis Harold (“Hal”) Gray, who is often called the father of radiobiology. He became Dr. Gray’s first (and last) Ph.D. student. Unfortunately, Dr. Gray was ill for much of the time Rod was there and died just before he completed his Ph.D. thesis. However, Rod benefitted from Dr. Gray’s vision of radiobiology as a fusion of physical, chemical and biologic sciences and the fact that the Gray laboratory was a melting pot with scientists with different backgrounds coming from all over the world, much like today’s makeup of the Radiation Research Society. It was an exciting time to be engaged in radiobiology research in London with many emerging discoveries, such as that the DNA synthetic cycle could be divided into phases, the importance of oxygen and hypoxia in cancer radiotherapy, pulse radiolysis, radiation sensitizers, quantitation of in vivo tumor survival curves and high-LET radiation effects. The proximity of physicist in particular must have shaped Rod’s thinking as he incorporated quantitation into practically every aspect of his radiobiological