Amino acids and serum proteins

Jacob A. Stekol, symposium chairman.

Amino Acids and Serum Proteins

Based on the Richard J. Block

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Jacob A. Stekol, Symposium Chairman

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- Richard J. Block, Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research, Yon-kers, N. Y.
- Amubha Chowdhury, Department of Radiation Biology, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, Rochester, N. Y.
- Thomas W. Cook, Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research, Yon-kers, N. Y.
- Vincent du Vigneaud, Department of Biochemistry, Cornell University Medical College, New York, N. Y.
- Santiago Grisolia, Department of Biochemistry, School of Medicine, University of Kansas Medical Center, Kansas City, Kansas.
- Merton L. Groves, Eastern Regional Research Laboratory, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Helen R. Hanavan, Department of Radiation Biology, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, Rochester, N. Y.
- S. Mark Henry, Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research, Yonkers, N. Y.
- Norbert J. Hipp, Eastern Regional Research Laboratory, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Joseph T. Holden, Department of Biochemistry, City of Hope Medical Center, Duarte, Calif.
- James M. Manning, Department of Biochemistry, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, Mass.
- Thomas L. McMeekin, Eastern Regional Research Laboratory, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Alton Meister, Department of Biochemistry, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, Mass.
- Leon L. Miller, Department of Radiation Biology, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, Rochester, N. Y.
- Kivie Moldave, Department of Biochemistry, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, Mass.
- Fred Plum, Department of Biochemistry, Cornell University Medical College, New York, N. Y.
- Julian R. Rachele, Department of Biochemistry, Cornell University Medical College, New York, N. Y.
- Luisa Raijman, Department of Biochemistry, School of Medicine, University of Kansas, Kansas City, Kansas.
- Lester J. Reed, Department of Biochemistry, Cornell University Medical College, New York, N. Y.
- Julius Schultz, Department of Biochemistry, Hahnemann Medical College, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Jakob A. Stekol, Department of Physiological Chemistry and Nutrition, Institute for Cancer Research, Philadelphia, Pa.

٧

- Neville Stone, Department of Biochemistry, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, Mass.
- Nantha Titthasiri, Department of Radiation Biology, University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, Rochester, N. Y.
- Gerrit Toennies, Department of General Biochemistry, Institute for Cancer Research, Philadelphia, Pa.
- John E. Wilson, Department of Biochemistry, Cornell University Medical College, New York, N. Y.

Preface

The tragic death of Dr. Richard J. Block in February 1962 was a great shock to his friends and colleagues. The members of the Executive Committee of the Division of Biological Chemistry who were familiar with his work proposed at the March 1962 meeting in Washington that a symposium be held in recognition of his lifetime efforts in advancing knowledge in amino acid and protein biochemistry. It is particularly important that in spite of Richard Block's reluctance to participate in Society affairs, other than to offer papers for presentation and to accept invitations to take part in symposia, the Executive Committee was willing on the basis of his reputation to sponsor a symposium in his honor at the national meeting of the American Chemical Society held in Atlantic City in September 1962. It is from this symposium that papers of this volume originated, in addition to investigations of other authors, who would have wished to participate but were pressed with other commitments.

The Executive Committee was especially fortunate in the ready acceptance by such an eminent biochemist as Dr. Jack Stekol to take on the duties of both the organization of the Richard J. Block Memorial Symposium and the creation of this volume. Such labors and those of the participants are a reflection of the deep regard in which Dr. Block was held by his colleagues.

It was fitting that Dr. Stekol, a lifetime friend, introduce this volume with a review of Richard Block's life and his scientific work. In the extensive bibliography included in this account, one finds a number of books and reviews, some of which serve today as "bibles" for laboratory procedures both for amino acid and protein research; and how many of us in the past consulted "Block and Bolling" for the amino acid composition of proteins! As students over a quarter of a century ago. some of us wondered why the title of some of Block's papers bore no relation to the contents. This was his way of overcoming "administrative" pressures as to what should be done in the laboratory, a problem that is particularly topical today when Congressional committees are questioning the freedom to "change" the direction of one's research. Block was a pioneer in this respect; the title satisfied the administrators who were not sufficiently knowledgeable to recognize that the research bore no obvious relation to the title. Yet today at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurological Institutes around the country, basic research on amino acids and proteins, not too much unlike Block's, is prevalent. In this respect the papers included in this volume, though apparently diverse, yet reflect a certain interrelationship well within the scope of Block's general interest and serve as an adequate tribute to his contributions.

> JULIUS SCHULTZ, Secretary

Division of Biological Chemistry, American Chemical Society

Richard Joseph Block 1906 - 1962

Richard Block and his wife, together with Dr. and Mrs. Jerome A. Uram and 14 other persons, died in a plane crash on February 4, 1962, shortly after leaving Tingo Maria, Peru. The Americans were on a mission sponsored by the National Institutes of Health in connection with the International Program on Nutrition Studies. His untimely death shocked his friends and colleagues, and brought to an abrupt end his active and productive career. The bibliography of his published work, printed on pages xvi through xxiii, will give some idea of the scope of his activities in the past 30 years, during which he collaborated with over 70 scientists. Block left numerous projects "on the fire." Most important of all, he left behind him friends who deeply feel the loss of such a rare human being. This was his greatest achievement.

He was born in Macon, Ga., on May 4, 1906, and received his B.S. in chemistry in 1928 and his Ph.D. in physiological chemistry in 1931 at Yale. While at Yale he received research inspiration, which never left him throughout life, from Professor L. B. Mendel, to whose memory Block remained fiercely loyal. Block was a friend to his friends. While he acknowledged his enemies, he ignored them, not permitting them to affect his way of life or his convictions. To him enemies were like booby traps or dangerous leaks in the roof: They merely required attention of a strictly technical nature.

His heart and mind were in his beloved amino acids and proteins, and among the amino acids those containing sulfur received a great deal of attention from him and his collaborators. In collaboration with R. Jackson, Block was among the first to establish the nutritional role of methionine and to point to the probable pathway of the conversion of its sulfur to that of cysteine. That was accomplished at a time when tracer methodology was only a gleam in the eye of the biochemist, and one's ingenuity and imagination had to be strained to the utmost in order to design and execute experiments which would be next best to a direct demonstration of the convertibility of one metabolite into another.

He studied the synthesis and utilization of sulfur-containing compounds in man, rat, dog, goat, cow, ewe, bacteria, yeasts, cockroach, and algae, constantly being aware that the results are good only as the methods which were employed to obtain them. He devoted a great deal of his time to the development of better and more refined chemical and chromatographic methods for the isolation and determination of amino acids in proteins from a variety of sources, and he had even set up a laboratory in his house for the purpose, where he worked at all hours.

Much time and effort were spent in compiling the analytical and preparative procedures for studying the amino acid composition of proteins of animal and plant origin, which resulted in his first book, "The Determination of the Amino Acids," followed by five more dealing with the amino acid composition of proteins and foods, paper chromatographic and electrophoretic methods, and analytical methods of protein chemistry.

This activity had its practical objective—namely, to establish, in accord with the views of L. B. Mendel and his students, the correlation of the amino acid composition of proteins with their nutritional value. In collaboration with H. H. Mitchell this objective was accomplished.

In 1933 Block proposed the "anlage" hypothesis, which postulates that certain structures of relatively constant composition are common to all the serum proteins. In the last 5 years of his life Block devoted his efforts to further development of this anlage hypothesis, applying more rigorous and newer methods which have become available. Truly, as Max Planck has remarked, scientists never give up their theories, and they appear to give them up only because they die. It would appear that this theory in one form or another, undoubtedly with modifications, deletions, additions, etc., beyond recognition of the original, will be developed further and even, perhaps, linked to the genetic code governing the protein structure and its biological properties.

While engaged in these activities, Block found time and energy to serve as professorial lecturer at New York Medical College; a visiting professor in the Department of Physiology and Biochemistry and an associate member of the Bureau of Biological Research of Rutgers University; chairman of the Sub-Committee on Biological Chemistry of the National Research Council; and a member of the Nutrition Study Section of the National Institutes of Health. He was a member of the American Chemical Society, American Society of Biological Chemists, American Institute of Nutrition, Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine, New York Academy of Sciences, American Institute of Chemists, AAAS, and Sigma Xi.

Block is survived by two daughters, Mrs. Werner Krebser and Mrs. Thomas Montie. Ralph Holman of the University of Minnesota, who was in Lima on a mission similar to that of Block, writes:

I delayed my departure from Lima in order that I could attend the funeral, for I had ascertained from the American Consul the interment was to be in Lima and none of the families would be present. The ceremony was simple and beautiful. Ambassador James Loeb spoke on behalf of the Government and recounted the accomplishments of the deceased and their mission to Latin America. Dr. Orlando Olsesse, President of the Universidad Agraria in Peru, next spoke on behalf of the Peruvians, expressing the gratitude they hold for Drs. Block and Uram in coming to aid in the relief of the nutritional problems of the country. He expressed the grief of the Peruvian scientists in the untimely death of such friends.

A symposium to honor the memory of R. J. Block was organized with the aid of the Division of Biological Chemistry of the American Chemical Society and held in September 1962 in Atlantic City, N. J. The papers presented at this symposium, together with additional contributions from several recognized authorities in their respective fields, are presented in this memorial volume as a tribute to R. J. Block from his friends and colleagues and as a wreath on his lonely grave in a foreign land.

J. A. STEKOL

The Institute for Cancer Research Philadelphia, Pa.

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xvi

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