A tribute to a deceased genius

This February, an exceptional international symposium on biomaterials was held at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST). The reason for its extraordinariness was not the symposium theme 'Emerging Biomaterials', nor the reputed scientific speakers from around the world, but the commemoration of a respected scholar who had committed suicide a year ago.

Professor Tae Gwan Park was a prominent master and mentor of biomaterials research. After graduating from Seoul National University School of Engineering in 1980, he earned his doctorate from the Department of Bioengineering at the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1990 under the guidance of Professor Allan S. Hoffman. In 1996, he joined the Department of Biological Sciences at KAIST, where he taught until his death. Professor Park was the recipient of numerous honors and awards during his academic career, which include the Clemson Award from the Society for Biomaterials and the Creative Knowledge Award, one of the highest awards bestowed by the Korean government.

Professor Hoffman began his presentation by describing Professor Park as an outstanding and creative scientist. He reviewed Professor Park's pioneering and ground breaking research work at University of Washington on "smart" poly(N-isopropylacrylamide) hydrogels. He described the current need for smart polymer diagnostic assays, which are inexpensive, rapid, and portable assay systems to diagnose and report on contagious diseases that

spread rapidly and create epidemic conditions in population centers throughout the world. He called these tests “Point of Care” assays, and explained that they were often carried out using microfluidic or paper “dipstick” assay formats. Professor Hoffman finished his speech with a summary of his own recent study outcomes and the contributions of Professor Park.

Personally, I cannot forget Tae Gwan Park’s enthusiastic academic guidance and amiability when I met him to discuss biomaterials for tissue regeneration and all of the participating well-known scientists, including Jeffrey Hubbell, Melody Swartz, Jackie Ying, Patrick Stayton, and Atsushi Maruyama highly estimated his warm personality as well as creative talent. Another of Professor Park’s mentors, Robert S. Langer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who could not join this meeting due to his schedule, sent a video talk and recalled that Professor Park was not only intelligent but also collaborative.

Although Professor Park took his own life, we do not have to think of him as gone if we comprehend a quote from Alan Watts, a British philosopher. In his book, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, he observes, ‘Life and death are not two opposed forces; they are simply two ways of looking at the same force, for the movement of change is as much the builder as the destroyer.’ Indeed, we owe our achievements in biomaterials research to him and live with him today.

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