Dr. Basil S. Hetzel died on February 4, 2017 after a truly transformative 70-year career in medicine, research, and public health advocacy. He was one of Australia’s most significant researchers, who will be remembered around the world for his groundbreaking work on cretinism and iodine deficiency, tireless international advocacy to eliminate IDD, and for co-founding the International Council for the Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (ICCIDD, now Iodine Global Network). A State Memorial Service was held at the Bonython Hall, University of Adelaide on Monday February 27, and was attended by many distinguished guests, including the Hon Jay Weatherill MP, Premier of South Australia, His Excellency The Hon Hieu Van Le AC, Governor of South Australia, Professor Guy Maddern, Director of the Basil Hetzel Institute for Translation Health Research, University of Adelaide, and Professor Mu Li, Board Director of the Iodine Global Network.

A highly respected scientist and humanitarian, Basil Hetzel was many things to a great many people. He was described as a gentle giant, a generous and inclusive colleague and friend, a consummate networker, a nurturing father, mentor, and role model, a moral compass to generations of people, and a tenacious scientist with a formidable intellect. He was a scientific explorer: instead of accepting and reproducing knowledge, he sought to investigate, to discover, and to research.

To the global iodine community, he was the author and protagonist of the iodine story, which began in the 1960s in a mountainous region of New Guinea. An invitation from the country’s Public Health Department to consult on endemic goiter and cretinism led Hetzel and his colleagues to the discovery that both conditions were caused by iodine deficiency, which could be prevented with iodine supplementation in the first half of pregnancy. Passionate about alleviating avoidable suffering, Hetzel made it his life’s mission to eliminate iodine deficiency around the world. Its sustained success, he understood, was dependent on strong political commitment at the national and global level.

With Hetzel’s leadership, the International Council for Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (ICCIDD) was established in 1986 to increase awareness of the seriousness of iodine deficiency, and to help...
afflicted countries work on programs to eradicate it through universal salt iodization. Armed with strong evidence, Hetzel and ICCIDD persuaded the Executive Director of UNICEF and other international public health bodies to adopt his vision of a world virtually free of iodine deficiency and take action.

A global IDD prevention program was launched at the UN World Summit for Children in New York in 1990, which met with unprecedented support from the leaders of 159 countries. This commitment was further reinforced in 2002, when the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children endorsed universal salt iodization as a strategy to eliminate IDD.

What has followed is tremendous global progress. Household usage of iodized salt increased from less than 20% before 1990 to 75% in 2015. From no more than a handful, the number of countries implementing national salt iodization has now exceeded 140, protecting an estimated 1 billion people from the scourge of IDD and saving countless IQ points. Justifiably, WHO has compared the global success of salt iodization to the eradication of smallpox and polio. With characteristic humility, Hetzel liked to describe himself as very fortunate, often stressing that the success of his endeavors was due to a combination of congenial opportunities and chance.

Hetzel’s tireless dedication brought him multiple awards and recognition, including the Prince Mahidol Prize, the Companion of the Order of Australia, and the US Pollin Prize in Pediatric Research. True to the values he so strongly espoused, Hetzel dedicated part of the Pollin Prize to fund his own award, which recognizes the crucial importance of public education and is granted annually to a person who has helped to further the awareness of IDD through print or electronic media. In March 2004, the Australian National Trust named Hetzel as one of Australia’s National Living Treasures, and in 2015 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Adelaide. In recognition of the significance of his early work on iodine deficiency, carried out at The Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Adelaide, South Australia, Hetzel was honored by having an institute named after him in 2001. Today, the Basil Hetzel Institute for Translational Health Research explores the causes, potential improvements in therapeutic outcomes, and the prevention of some of the most serious and common health conditions facing humans today. Hetzel maintained a close interest in the Institute’s research and remained one of its great supporters.

First as Executive Director in 1985–1995, then as its Chairman, Hetzel stayed at the helm of ICCIDD until his retirement in 2005. Even in the later chapters of his life, he was keen to continue telling the iodine story. In 2012 he gave what was to be his final scientific seminar at the Sansom Institute for Health Research. In this seminar, Hetzel took the audience on the familiar journey that began half a century ago in New Guinea, and which will one day end with the global elimination of IDD. The final chapter, when it’s written, will be the legacy of Professor Basil Hetzel.

Hetzel’s portrait by Avril Thomas, titled “The Remedy” depicts him with a salt mill in his hand, surrounded by black and white photographs of adults and children with short stature and other characteristic features of cretinism, taken during his studies of iodine deficiency. Behind him, a globe and a brain are balanced on a scale, symbolizing the impact of his research on the global public health. The portrait is on display at the Basil Hetzel Institute in Adelaide, South Australia.