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Dame Bridget Ogilvie, Wellcome Trust director who fought the ‘anti-scientific’ frenzies of the 1990s

An Australian parasitologist, she oversaw the Wellcome Trust’s expansion from giving away £10 million a year to £300 million a year



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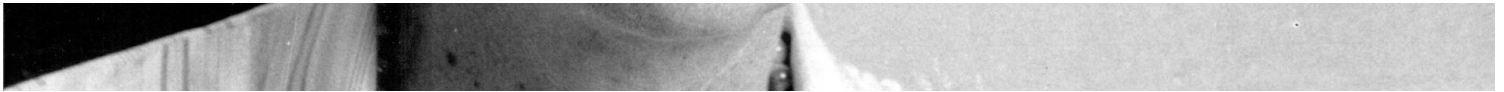


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Dame Bridget Ogilvie: warned that a wilful lack of public understanding, in some cases exacerbated by the poor teaching of science in schools, threatened to drive scientific research overseas Credit: Fairfax Media Archives

Telegraph Obituaries

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Dame Bridget Ogilvie, who has died aged 88, was brought up on a sheep station in Australia, moved to Britain and became a leading authority on parasitology; but it was her commitment to promoting the public understanding and appreciation of science that raised her to national prominence.

Bridget Margaret Ogilvie was born on March 24 1938 and raised on her family's sheep station in northern New South Wales. After education at New England Girls' School, Armidale, she began reading science at the University of Queensland but after a year moved to the University of New England at Armidale, where she completed her degree in rural science.

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After graduation she was one of the first Commonwealth Scholars to go to Cambridge University, where she studied for a doctorate at the Veterinary

School under E.J.L. Soulsby. After that she spent 17 years doing research into the immune response to parasites, mainly gastrointestinal nematodes, at the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) in London.

At first her research mainly concerned veterinary parasites in sheep and cattle, but later she decided to embark on the study of human parasitic nematodes, hookworm and lymphatic filaria. During this time she received numerous honours and awards and published about 100 papers on parasites and the immune response in learned journals.

In 1978 she met P.O. Williams, the director of the Wellcome Trust, at a symposium on human hookworm, held in Italy. At his invitation she spent a sabbatical year running the tropical medicine research division at the Wellcome Trust. She stayed on, initially alternating her commitments there with her research at the NIMR, then in 1981 joined the staff of the Wellcome Trust full-time.

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During the 19 years she spent there, the Wellcome Trust grew from a modestly sized research funding body, giving away about £10 million in research grants a year, to a very large body, dispensing about £300 million a year. She served as its director from 1991 to 1998, years which saw the establishment and development of the Sanger Institute near Cambridge, which has become a key organisation in the work to sequence human and pathogenic genomes. After her retirement she became a visiting professor at University College London.

Bridget Ogilvie's experience at the sharp end of scientific research made her increasingly concerned by the growing anti-scientific culture in British society and what she described as the "public frenzies" attending such issues as BSE and GM food. These, she believed, were based on a wilful lack of understanding, in some cases exacerbated by the poor teaching of science in schools, and threatened to drive scientific research overseas.



Bridget Ogilvie Credit: Alamy

Under her direction, the Wellcome Trust became involved in improving public understanding of science and its social and ethical implications. She continued her commitment in a variety of public and commercial appointments, including as a trustee of the Science Museum and of the National Endowment of Science, Technology and the Arts; as a member of the National Council of Science and Technology; as chairman of the AstraZeneca science teaching trust; and as chairman of the governing body of the Institute of Animal Health.

In 1998 she was appointed chairman of the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science, but resigned in 2002 in protest at what she saw as

the Royal Society's obstructionist refusal to support her in turning the committee into an umbrella organisation. A parliamentary committee hauled the Society over the coals in response. But it seems there were no ill feelings, as in 2003 she was named as one of 42 new fellows of the Society and one of a record intake of nine female scientists, nominated for her leadership in medical research and life sciences.

Bridget Ogilvie's involvement in tropical medicine inspired her lifelong interest in the problem of how scientists can develop treatments for human diseases that "lack market pull", in that they chiefly affect the poor. In 1999 she became chairman of Medicines for Malaria, a venture set up with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop new drugs. As a public speaker, she called for medical science, industry and charities to work together.

She also served as a trustee of Cancer Research UK, chairman of the Association of Medical Research Charities and non-executive Director of AstraZeneca and the Manchester Technology Fund. From 2001 to 2009 she was High Steward of Cambridge University.

She was appointed DBE in 1997 and a Companion of the Order of Australia in 2007.

In 2004 there was a flurry of press outrage when it emerged, following the introduction of new citizenship rules by the Home Secretary David Blunkett, that she had had her application for a British passport refused, on the grounds that the Home Office was not convinced she could speak English.

"It all seems barmy to me," Dame Bridget told an interviewer. "On the form, all they ask for is your date of birth, where you live and how long you have lived there – not what your contribution to this country has been. It is clearly designed for asylum-seekers, not strange old folk from the Commonwealth." A few days later the Home Office confirmed that she did, after all, qualify for a British passport.

Bridget Ogilvie was unmarried.

Dame Bridget Ogilvie, born March 24 1938, died April 27 2026