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Bridget Ogilvie

Parasitologist, Wellcome Director, and science communicator. Born on March 24, 1938, in Glen Innes, NSW, Australia, she died in London, UK, on April 27, 2026, aged 88 years.

Forthright Australian scientist Bridget Ogilvie swapped a renowned research career in parasitology for scientific leadership at a time when women at the helm were a rarity in biomedicine. She led the Wellcome Trust, Britain's largest medical research charity, at a time of great expansion.

While she was Director, Wellcome's budget increased hugely and rather than give out small amounts of funding on short-term projects she persuaded her team that larger, enduring programmes were more meaningful. Crucially, she spearheaded the creation of the Wellcome Sanger Institute in 1992–93, which ensured the UK was at the heart of human genome research. Ogilvie insisted the human genome should not be privatised. She also leveraged a long-term commitment to funding postgraduate science, persuading the new Labour Government to match the £300 million pledged by Wellcome, enabling British universities to substantially update their research buildings and equipment. Tracey Brown, Chief Executive of Sense about Science, a charity Ogilvie co-founded, said, "Bridget's approach led to a change of mindset on a number of fronts: making genomic information available for other researchers to pick up and run with was embedded; and funding universities, such as Imperial and UCL, into world-leading scientific powerhouses with the idea of creating the infrastructure on which the next generation of researchers could build on."

As a leader, Ogilvie was pragmatic and made difficult decisions swiftly, getting others aligned to her point of view.

She was also known for her kindness, her support as a mentor, and her oft-heard laugh. "She would call a spade a spade, which was very refreshing. Her laugh could be heard several rooms away when she was enjoying an interaction. You knew when Bridget was in the area", said Peter Openshaw, Professor of Experimental Medicine, Imperial College London, UK, who was appointed a Wellcome Clinical Fellow in 1988.

Born into a farming family in New South Wales, Ogilvie's father supported his bright daughter, saying education was the "finest fertiliser". She studied rural science at Australia's University of New England, graduating in 1960. Ogilvie was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study for a PhD in parasitology at the University of Cambridge, UK, from 1960 to 1964. After that, she worked as a Wellcome Trust Animal Health Research Fellow at the National Institute of Medical Research (NIMR) in Mill Hill, north London, where she led a laboratory studying the immune response to helminths. Rick Maizels, now Professor of Parasitology at the University of Glasgow, was a postdoctoral researcher in NIMR at the time. "She was amazingly constructive, positive, and encouraging, with no hint of wanting anything done for herself", he said.

In 1979, Ogilvie joined Wellcome to run the tropical medicine programme while also working at the NIMR. She took on responsibility for six research sites in Brazil, Jamaica, Kenya, south India, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Ogilvie joined Wellcome full time in 1981 and led the organisation from 1991 to 1998. "As programme manager, she was sensational. She talked to and advised everyone in the field, worked out ways of rescuing people who'd fallen into the cogs of universities and got mangled. She recognised good people and took care of them. When she moved on to Director, she did the same thing but with institutions. Anything that needed attention, she not only turned her mind to it, but she made sure there was a fantastic outcome", Maizels said.

In retirement, she was the founding Chair of the Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV), working closely with its then CEO, biotechnologist Christopher Hentschel. "The first thing she said to me was, 'Chris, let me know how the board can help you.' That was almost a shock to me, because my experience of most boards have been almost the opposite", Hentschel said. At Wellcome, she had made outreach and engagement a key part of its activities and later chaired the UK's Committee on the Public Understanding of Science. Subsequently, she co-founded the charity Sense About Science and served as its Vice Chair from 2008 to 2022. She became Brown's mentor. "Bridget made you feel you wanted to do your very best in everything you tried. She was very forgiving of trying and failing, and the risks that were attached with doing difficult things. But the one thing you could never do was make excuses." Ogilvie was made a Dame in 1996 and in 2007 a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC). She is survived by her brother William, sister Mary, and their families.

Jacqui Thornton