

Bridget Ogilvie, 1938-2026

A renowned parasitologist, dedicated to supporting pioneering research in the UK and around the world as well as championing the public's understanding of science, Dame Bridget Ogilvie died on 27 April 2026. Following a distinguished research career, she helped shape global health research in her roles at Wellcome, including as director between 1991-98. In that time, she oversaw the establishment of the Wellcome Sanger Institute.



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Dr Bridget Ogilvie, while in Australia for business, on March 19 1992. She said at the time: "We can do things which 20 years ago were undreamt of." Adding that the study of molecular genetics offers the greatest promise for understanding and eventually controlling major diseases.

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A bold, inspiring, supportive leader, with a vision for long-term science who never shied from a challenge, Bridget was responsible for funding world-leading research that has made some of the most significant impacts on human health.

Bridget played a fundamental role in establishing the Wellcome Sanger Institute. She would go on to cite it as one of her main achievements. Genomic researchers, racing to sequence the human genome – an unfathomably ambitious project at the time – approached Wellcome and the government for funding to keep that research in the UK.

She shrewdly anticipated the potential impact of such a project and her decisiveness helped to secure that funding, quickly setting up a lab in Hinxton, Cambridgeshire in 1992. The following year, this lab formally became the Wellcome Sanger Institute. In a 2011 interview, she said: “The Americans were astounded to find this UK-based charity with suddenly so much money. So it had a big influence. It was amazing, watching the whole experience...we then set about building that enormous campus at vastly greater expense!”

Early career research

Bridget grew up on a farm in New South Wales, Australia. citing this in 2011 as having

an influence on her research career. She went on to study rural science at the University of New England, graduating in 1960, which reaffirmed her passion for science.

She was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study for a PhD in parasitology at the University of Cambridge, 1960-64, and after completion, became a Wellcome Trust/Animal Health Research Fellow at the National Institute of Medical Research in north London. There, she studied the immune response to helminths – worm-like parasites, including roundworms and tapeworms – that can cause a wide spectrum of disease in humans, from mild immune response to the potentially fatal.

Funding pioneering research

Looking for a new challenge in 1979, Bridget met Peter Williams, then the director of Wellcome, who sensed a restlessness in her research career. Soon after, she joined Wellcome to run the tropical medicine programme. She initially took on responsibility for six research sites around the world – in Brazil, Jamaica, Kenya, South India, and Thailand, and Vietnam. When asked about the move to Wellcome, she recognised that the change from the lab to a funding organisation would help her facilitate the research of many others.

Bridget became Wellcome's director (the role now known as chief executive) in 1991. This was a pivotal period for her, Wellcome and wider global health research. In 1993, she helped to establish the Wellcome Sanger Institute. It quickly became a world-leading centre for genomics research and had a fundamental role in the Human Genome Project, which has gone on to transform life sciences. Crucially, Bridget staunchly supported the idea that genome should not be privatised, instead advocating for it to remain free to use for researchers around the world.

Bridget remained rooted to her work on tropical medicine. As director in the 1990s, she expanded Wellcome's major international partnerships, with both the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit and the Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Research Project (MLW) established during her tenure.

Communicating science

Bridget was also a passionate advocate for science communication, believing deeply that scientists should engage openly and confidently with the public.

She maintained keen interest in research post-retirement, taking on a number of roles at scientific organisations, including as a trustee at Cancer Research UK (2001-2010) and chair of the Association of Medical Research Charities (2003-2007). Most recently, she was deputy chair of Sense About Science from 2008-2022, a charity she co-founded promoting public interest in scientific evidence.

Bridget received numerous awards and honours throughout her career, notably a damehood in the 1996 new year's honours. In the 2007 Australia Day honours, Bridget was awarded the companion of honour (AC) – the country's highest civilian honour – for "service to science in the field of biomedical research particularly related to veterinary and medical parasitology, and through support for research funding to improve global health".

John-Arne Røttingen, Wellcome's Chief Executive, says: "Bridget was a true global leader in research funding, paving the way not only for scientific research itself, but setting an example in fostering true global collaboration. A renowned scientist, dedicated to supporting research, her work at Wellcome supported a wide range of scientific disciplines, making a profound and remarkable impact to global health."

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