Sylvia Meek

Technical Director of Malaria Consortium. She was born in Birmingham, UK, on Oct 8, 1954, and died of breast cancer in London, UK, on May 11, 2016, aged 61 years.

Sylvia Meek may have been small in stature, but when it came to her passion for tackling malaria she stood indisputably tall. The vehicle by which she turned her ambitions into reality was Malaria Consortium, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) specialising in the prevention, control, and treatment of this disease in vulnerable populations. She was its Technical Director from 2003 until her death. “Sylvia was instrumental in bringing about a lot of the reductions in malaria morbidity and mortality that we’ve seen in the last 10 years”, says Prudence Hamade, a Senior Technical Adviser to Malaria Consortium. “In Uganda, for example, Malaria Consortium was the first to show that community health workers could actually deliver malaria diagnosis and treatment...This was an innovative idea which has now spread around everywhere.”

The use of such workers helped to overcome a widespread lack of access to health care, and led on to the development of integrated community management arrangements for diarrhoea and pneumonia as well as malaria. As Hamade explains, Meek “had demonstrated the principle, at community level, of using drugs that were administered by unqualified but trained workers”.

That Meek had the confidence to push through such a scheme reflected the first-hand experience she’d acquired during her years of working in the field. “Being among the people is what she really loved”, says Hamade. “She’d spent a long time in refugee camps on the Thai–Cambodian border during the time of the Khmer Rouge, which was quite dangerous. She was an entomologist by background, but due to lack of anyone else to do it found herself diagnosing and treating malaria and teaching others. So she had direct experience of training unqualified staff to deliver care.” Meek could be equally effective away from the field, not least in persuading executive bodies of the need for policy changes. When WHO established its Malaria Policy Advisory Committee in 2011 Meek was invited to join it. As Malaria Consortium’s Chief Executive Charles Nelson has commented, her role on this was very precious to her. “As she saw it, it gave her the chance to shape and influence, through evidence, what was being recommended to most effectively save lives around the world.”

With a degree in zoology from Oxford University and a masters in animal parasitology from the then University College of North Wales, Meek went on to do a PhD in the genetics and control of filariasis vectors. The last of these qualifications, completed in 1982, was done under the joint auspices of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine: an academic combination that was to re-enter her life some dozen years later. While researching her PhD Meek also worked for the World Food Programme and the UN Development Programme in Thailand. Her thesis completed, she continued with the two agencies for a further 5 years as an entomologist working on vector-borne disease control.

It was in 1994 that Meek established Malaria Consortium. Run jointly by the London and Liverpool schools of tropical medicine it was initially conceived as a resource centre for the UK Government’s Department of International Development (DFID). In due course Meek and her colleagues felt that its best way forward was to go independent and become an NGO. “They started off with a minimal amount of money, but expanded very rapidly”, says Hamade. “They wanted not just to be advisers to DFID, but to drive forward the reduction of malaria by implementing high-quality research.” With Meek as its Technical Director, Malaria Consortium moved from being a mainly academic body to one concerned with the practical application of knowledge.

In a eulogy delivered at Meek’s funeral, Nelson described her as a woman with humility, graciousness, an infectious enthusiasm, and a great passion for science. She ran everywhere, he added, whether it was between meetings or across airports. “She so wanted to fill her time with doing the things she valued that the bits in between were all done fast.” People working in the field appreciated her visits, says Hamade. “Sylvia had the human touch. She could listen, she could understand their stresses, she knew about their families, she would be involved in more than just their professional lives.” Meek is survived by a sister, Carrie, and a brother, Tom.