Dr Sylvia Meek
Scientist who led the fight against malaria

Sylvia Meek was a leading figure in developing the prevention and control measures that have led to a 60 per cent reduction in deaths from malaria since 2000. The British scientist helped to build up the Malaria Consortium into one of the world’s foremost non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to treating people with the disease. Meek drove a more practical approach to dealing with the condition, which accounted for 438,000 deaths in 2015. In the 1990s she championed “home-based management”, where community members in remote villages in Africa and Asia would be trained to carry out simple diagnosis and treatments. In remote areas where people struggled to travel to the nearest medical centre, and were in any case wary of being cared for by those beyond their own community, this widely implemented strategy has been credited with saving thousands of lives, especially those of children.

A diminutive figure nicknamed the “Mighty Atom”, Meek commanded respect wherever she was addressing the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or the All-party Parliamentary Group on Malaria. She spoke with the authority of more than 30 years’ experience in the field, which was piled on at great personal risk of infection, weighed down with a heavy backpack and equipped with a small yellow Swiss army knife. As a young aid worker for the WHO and the UN development programme, she worked for five years from 1982 to 1987 in Thailand-Cambodia border refugee camps, helping to set up disease-control programmes for 200,000 refugees displaced by the Pol Pot regime.

On her return to London in the early 1990s, Meek led the Malaria Consortium – a programme supported by the London and Liverpool schools of hygiene and tropical medicine – over which she presided from 1995 to 1997. She studied for an MSc in medical parasitology at the University College of North Wales in Bangor and received a PhD in parasitology in 1987 from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Meek was nicknamed ‘Mighty Atom’ for her small stature and big impact. She never married or built up a large network of friends all over the world. Many of them had witnessed her tendency to go to the remotest places to investigate the effects of malaria. During an early trip to the Somaliland, she made a 10-hour drive in a truck to an outlying island and was strapped by the authorities. Having been stranded like Robinson Crusoe, she was rescued after several weeks, having made very good use of her trusty Swiss army knife.

Dr Sylvia Meek, scientist, was born in Birmingham in 1954 to Robert and Joyce (née Allen) Meek. She grew up in Kingston upon Hull, where her father was a GP. Young Sylvia had a nest for exploration. Her father once rescued her from a deep well in rural Shropshire. When she finally emerged, she was covered with amphipods.

She loved the countryside and on family outings to the Yorkshire Moors wanted to know every detail about the cliffs, moors and rivers. At home, she read her younger sisters fairytales. Rupunzel was particular favourite. She climbed her own ivory tower when, in 1987, she left Newnham High School for Girls, having obtained a place at Somerville College, Oxford, to read English.

A year after she switched to zoology, in which she was awarded an MA in 1977. She studied for an MSc in medical parasitology at the University College of North Wales in Bangor and received a PhD in parasitology in 1987 from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Medicine and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine were the starting points for her research. She allowed mosquitoes to feed off her arm. It was a brave gesture; she could not stand the sight of blood.

After she was diagnosed with breast cancer 18 months ago, the question she asked most often was “when can I return to work?” This was not to be, but she managed to make a presentation to the international development department and attend a recent WHO malaria policy conference in Geneva, while keeping herself up to date on the Zika virus and dengue fever.

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THE SMITHS
BEHIND THE SCENES, HERE WE COME

Richard Davolos, actor, was born on November 5, 1930. He died on March 8, 2016, aged 85

Deepti Dave, a visual artist known for her work on the cover of the Smiths' final album, below