

In memory of the silent and long-lasting leader in our malaria community, Sylvia Meek

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A friend and colleague for many more years: Together in the fight against malaria for 20 years

With the passing away of Sylvia Meek, this is a very sad day for me and for many of us in the malaria community; probably the saddest day since the renewed fight against malaria began. Sylvia will be remembered by me and in our malaria world for much more than all her technical knowledge and expertise, more than her fantastic abilities to fight on the ground, but as an exceptional human being. As someone said today on hearing the sad news echoing our thoughts: “Sylvia was one of the nicest, loveliest, best people I ever encountered in this long working life.”

There will be many tributes to Sylvia from academic and technical communities for her work and contributions. I would like to pay a special tribute to Sylvia Meek herself. For some of us who have known Sylvia Meek for 20 years or more the one constant that will continue to resonate for a long time is her selfless contribution to our cause. What we will remember is that her pursuit was never driven by glory, power or even for an acknowledgement for what she did. For this, we need to crown our achievements in defeating malaria with her real brilliance both as an exceptional expert but also as an amazing human being; from whom we can all learn how to work together selflessly.

We worked together for many years during the good and challenging times when Malaria Consortium, as a programme, was at the London and Liverpool Schools of Tropical Medicine and then founding and building from absolute zero Malaria Consortium as a charity we all know today. We worked tirelessly, sacrificing our personal and family lives but she almost always was the last one to lock the office and turn off the lights in the middle of the night. Through all those times Sylvia was always much more magnanimous than I could ever be and she was always more forgiving than all of us put together. Even though she reiterated many times that she did not want to be the last one amongst the founding trio, including Graham Root, to be left at the Malaria Consortium, circumstances so determined that she was; and despite her wishes she stayed as the custodian of what is the ‘heart’ of the organisation. Once again, sacrificing her own interests for organisation. This heart is important as the organisation was built on equality within diversity, mutual respect for all disciplines and roles, building partnerships, enabling new and young, while at the same time technically uncompromising, that is what she believed and we upheld, together.

However hard we try, as we continue on our journey towards a malaria free world, we will not progress unless we carry forth not only what Sylvia Meek has contributed to the science of malaria control or elimination but also what she exemplified as a person. She will continue to live amongst us for a very long time.

Thank you Sylvia for all you have given to the cause of malaria; the lives you have helped to save and the suffering you have alleviated amongst many communities

Thus I will end my tribute to Sylvia with something, she demonstrated me and many others by her example: that you do not always have to lead from the front but can do so just as effectively from the back – thus making sure nothing and no one is left behind.