



## OBITUARIES

## Tessa Holyoake

Experimental haematologist whose work transformed the treatment of chronic myeloid leukaemia

Mhairi Copland, Jeff Evans, Owen Samson, Mark Drummond



Tessa Holyoake, a world renowned expert in chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML), has died at the age of 54. She was the professor of experimental haematology at the Institute of Cancer Sciences at the University of Glasgow and director of the Paul O’Gorman Leukaemia Research Centre. Born in Aberdeen in 1963, she was educated at Albyn School and later studied medicine at the University of Glasgow before embarking on a research career in Glasgow and, for two years, Vancouver.

### CML research

She joined Glasgow University in 1992 and was awarded a personal professorship in October 2004. Her observations have transformed our understanding of CML and its treatment. Most notably, she was the first to identify the existence of cancer stem cells in CML in 1999 during her research fellowship in Vancouver. Later, she showed the resistance of these stem cells to CML-specific therapies, such as imatinib and newer, more potent CML therapies.

Tessa made a crucial contribution to her specialism by identifying key CML stem cell survival pathways that can be manipulated to develop potential new treatments. As a result of her research, patients with CML who have not responded to standard therapies have been offered alternative treatment in clinical trials in an attempt to achieve remission. From 2002

onwards, Tessa studied resistance to treatment. This prompted much research activity across the world and generated new therapeutic strategies that are currently being evaluated in clinical trials.

In addition to her research work and clinical expertise in driving national and international strategies for patient management, Tessa was a member of many grant awarding bodies, including the European Hematology Association, Medical Research Council, Cancer Research UK, the Academy of Medical Sciences, and Bloodwise. She also sat on the editorial boards of scientific journals—including *Blood*, *Leukaemia*, and the *British Journal of Haematology*—and organised and gave plenary lectures at conferences around the world. She had numerous publications in journals including *Nature*, *Cancer Discovery*, and the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

### Paul O’Gorman Leukaemia Research Centre

Tessa was the director of the Paul O’Gorman Leukaemia Research Centre and a key member of the advisory board for the fundraising campaign to build the centre, raising over £4m (€4.4m; \$5.3m). She also led the design and commissioning of the facility, which was opened in 2008. The centre now houses and supports seven translational research team leaders and around 45 research scientists and students, all working in experimental haematology. The centre is recognised internationally for its leukaemia research and houses the largest biobank of CML patient samples in the world.

Tessa held research grants worth over £8m from research councils, charities, and industry. In addition to her role as director of the centre, she was a consultant haematologist at the Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre. While her patients there often expressed their admiration for her scientific achievements, her main focus was always to be an excellent and compassionate clinician.

In 2009 she won the Scottish Health Awards Cancer Care Award; in 2011 the Lord Provost of Glasgow Health Award; and in 2015 she was awarded the Scottish Alba Saltire Society Fletcher of Saltoun award for her contribution to science, and the Scottish Cancer Foundation’s inaugural prize and Evans/Forrest Medal. She was appointed a fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences in 2013. In March 2017, she was awarded the Rowley Prize by the International CML Foundation in recognition of her work on understanding and targeting CML stem cells.

She was elected to the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) in 2007, and in July 2017 she was awarded a RSE Royal Medal in recognition of her contribution to life sciences, through her discovery of the existence of cancer stem cells in CML and her development of a new therapy for this condition.

## Away from work

Outside work, Tessa spent much of her time with her husband, Andy, at their holiday house on Loch Tummel, usually in the company of friends and family. Cycling, running, swimming, or some other exercise was invariably on the agenda, as was a soak in the hot tub in the early evening. With the help of friends, family, and excellent support from the local general practitioner and district nurse, Tessa was able to stay at the holiday home until she died.

Asked to describe Tessa in three words, colleagues and friends agreed she was energetic, enthusiastic, and motivational. She will be remembered as a dedicated clinician, outstanding scientist, fearless mountain biker, and cake lover. Tessa Holyoake leaves her husband, Andy; her mum, Mary; her sister, Sylvia; and her brother, Nick.

## Biography

Tessa Laurie Holyoake (b 1963; q Glasgow 1985), died from breast cancer on 30 August 2017

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