

Professor Sheila Bingham OBE

Professor Sheila Bingham, was an international leader in nutritional epidemiology, conducting detailed studies to clarify the biological mechanisms underlying the effects of diet on health and disease, particularly cancer. It is with great sadness that we acknowledge her death on 16th June 2009.

Professor Bingham spent most of her career based at Cambridge, where she worked for the Medical Research Council for 33 years, and latterly with the University. She produced hundreds of research publications which have led to a much better understanding of the relationship between nutrition and chronic disease, thereby improving the evidence base for public health policy.

The role of nutrition in health and disease is undisputed. But there is still substantial controversy about whether nutrients, foods or dietary patterns are linked to greater risk of chronic diseases such as cancers and osteoporosis. Much of this is due to the difficulty in objectively assessing diet in most human populations. Early epidemiologic studies relied on self-reported dietary intake using yardsticks such as the food frequency questionnaire, 24-hour diet recalls or diet histories, but these instruments were deemed subjective and of questionable validity.

She was responsible for developing objective biomarkers for assessing dietary intake and nutritional status suitable for use in large population studies.

In the 1990s, she was also one of the founding investigators of the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer, one of the largest international research collaborations, with 10 countries and half a million participants, initiated to provide more substantive evidence on the relationship between diet and cancer-risk across the wide range of dietary patterns throughout Europe. She led some of the early keynote work, demonstrating an interaction between meat and fibre intake, such that the adverse relationship of meat eating and colorectal cancer was most apparent in those with low fibre intake.

Diet and cancer relationships have been much challenged in recent years, and Sheila Rodwell's commitment to re-examining and strengthening the evidence base resulted in her establishing the Medical Research Centre for Nutritional Epidemiology in Cancer Prevention and Survival in the University of Cambridge in 2005.

She also believed in making a difference to public health and was a long standing independent expert on the Department of Health's Committee for Medical Aspects of Nutrition, later the Food Standards Agency Scientific Advisory Committee for Nutrition. There she was particularly involved in the evidence and recommendations on salt reduction in the population.

Her contributions were recognised by numerous prizes and awards, including her fellowship of the Academy of Medical Sciences and honorary professorships in Cambridge and Coleraine. She was appointed OBE in June this year, but died of cancer a few days after the announcement.

Professor Bingham was an exceptional scientist, mentor and PhD supervisor to many and will be a sad loss to the field.