

Leena Peltonen-Palotie, MD, PhD (1952-2010)

Lena Peltonen, MD, PhD, Head of Human Genetics at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute and former ASHG Board Member (2002-2004), passed away on March 11, 2010 at her home in Finland after a long and characteristically courageous battle with cancer at age 57.



Leena was a leading human geneticist of her era, holding appointments at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, the Institute for Molecular Medicine in Finland and the Broad Institute in Cambridge, MA. In the past six months, she was honored with the Carter medal from the Clinical Genetics Society for her outstanding contribution to clinical genetics and recognition as Academician of Science, the highest honor in her home country.

She had a tremendously distinguished career, publishing more than 500 research papers as well as almost 80 review articles and serving on the Boards of the American Society of Human Genetics from 2002-2004, the European Society of Human Genetics, and a dozen other scientific organizations. Her knowledge and wisdom were called upon for national and international committees on population genetics, clinical genetics and ethics of genetics research. She always saw her research firmly in the context of the needs of society.

Leena received her MD in 1976 and PhD in 1978 from the University of Oulu, Finland. She carried out postdoctoral research at Rutgers Medical School in New Jersey, after which she returned to Finland and became a Professor at the National Public Health Institute in 1991. In 1998, she returned to the US to establish a major genetics research centre at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), which she led for four years. In 2002, Leena returned to Finland once again to hold a Professorship in the University of Helsinki and the National Public Health Institute. She rose in influence and was invited to hold a Visiting Professorship at the Broad Institute, one of the world's leading genetics institutions. In 2007, she assumed the position of Head of Human Genetics at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute to be held concurrently with her roles in Finland and the U.S.

Leena was a visionary geneticist, champion of population genetics and public health, firmly supporting public health strategies alongside clinical measures to improve human health. Leena's return to her European roots reflected her personal commitment to the understanding and conquest of genetic disease and her vision of the importance of European population genetics in this quest. She worked tirelessly to bring together human genetics activities across Europe. The Sanger Institute and the progress of human genetics globally are diminished by her passing.

Leena's vision and charisma have been inspirational to many, particularly the younger generation. As a teacher and scholar she has fostered the next generation of geneticists, supervising more than 70 PhD students. As Head of Human Genetics at the Sanger Institute, she has recruited a cadre of young faculty and energized the institution's scientific programs. Her legacy, though, is international: she has transformed science and scientists where she has left her touch. It is also personal: she evinced strong support and respect in all those with whom she worked.