

The University of Geneva just lost one of its most brilliant former students and colleagues. Elisa Izaurre passed away a few days ago after losing her battle with a terminal illness. Originally from Uruguay, she performed her undergraduate studies in Biochemistry at the University of Geneva and subsequently her PhD thesis work, on the structural organization of DNA, in the laboratory of Professor Ulrich Laemmli in the Department of Molecular Biology. Already at these early stages in her career, her extraordinary talents – remarkable intellect, quick wit and iron will hidden under a soft and calm aura, awe-inspiring work ethic – were readily apparent. After Post-Doctoral work, first in Geneva, then with Iain Mattaj at the EMBL (European Molecular Biology Laboratory) in Heidelberg, Germany, she quickly gained international recognition owing to her exceptional work on RNA metabolism. In particular, she studied the manner in which cells control the activity and quality of messenger RNAs in cells. Messenger RNAs are translated to produce proteins, the work horses of our cells. Specifically, she investigated how RNA is exported from the nucleus to the cytoplasm, how defective and thus potentially dangerous RNA is degraded, and how endogenous small RNA molecules function to silence the expression of other, larger messenger RNAs. Elisa Izaurre discovered key factors involved in these processes, and decoded their modes of action at the molecular level. During her career, Elisa Izaurre fearlessly launched novel research programmes in her group and embraced new technologies to great success. Of note, in her later years, she initiated a line of research in structural biology, using X-ray crystallography and nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy.

In 1996 Elisa Izaurre returned to the Department of Molecular Biology as a “*maître d’enseignement et de recherché*”. She ran a very productive independent research group for a few years, before taking up a group leader position at the EMBL in Heidelberg in 1999. Some years later, and in light of her remarkable scientific accomplishments, she was offered full professorship in Geneva, but looking for new adventures, she finally accepted an appointment as the Scientific Director of the Department of Biochemistry at the Max-Planck Institute for Developmental Biology in Tübingen, which she led from 2005 until her death.

Today the scientific research of Elisa Izaurre is known the world over because of her spectacular contributions to our understanding of how our genetic material is expressed. Her untimely passing leaves a great void that will be hard to fill. We remember her as a radiant personality with intelligence, energy and enthusiasm for outstanding science.