

A personal journey full circle, from curiosity about life on Earth to transformative therapies at Novartis

From curiosity about life on Earth to transformative therapies at Novartis. Michelle L Krishnan, Executive Director, MD PhD.

By [Michelle L Krishnan](#) | May 27, 2024

When I was young, my interest in science initially started with the natural world and with animals. There's a BBC Nature presenter and biologist called David Attenborough who's very famous in the UK and he was a really big idol of mine. At around age ten I discovered his book "*Life on Earth*" and started to become more interested in science. My dream was to be his field assistant, so that was my first sort of scientific ambition.

What's great is that I once bumped into him on British Airways when I was on a work trip, and I just felt like a teenager in awe. I went up to him, and said "*you're my inspiration to be a scientist*" and he graciously responded "*ohh well thank you.*" while trying to store away his carry - on luggage in the overhead locker. He was really sweet, and in a way, it felt like an aspect of my life that had come full circle.

So, I started to think about what could I actually do with this interest in science?

I initially gained some work experience in a veterinary practice, and while I enjoyed being around animals, it made me think more about working with people - was there something I could do to really help people through exciting science and be able to change the course of their illness?

Moving into industry

So, I became a physician. After training as a doctor and working in the British National Health Service for ten years, I decided to broaden my horizons and move into industry about seven years ago. Four years ago, I was contacted by a Novartis recruiter who said they were looking for a physician to focus on gene therapies. This was interesting to me because gene therapy was (and remains) at the forefront of this new area of science. After starting at Novartis Gene Therapies, that led me to the Translational Medicine team at Biomedical Research.



Michelle L Krishnan, Executive Director, MD PhD

My current role is as a Translational Medicine Expert. I'm responsible for translating the data our bench scientists are generating into a human context, with the insights from the patients and external experts, and putting all that together to design a clinical trial that can answer the question of whether we have a new, safe and effective therapy. And I think for me, I really enjoy and find meaning and connection in this aspect of translating the science into actually becoming a medicine. That process of creation ultimately gives us the best possibility of a new medicine that can change people's lives.

Collaboration: a real strength

The teams we collaborate with within Novartis are global, which I think is wonderful, it's a real strength. In some ways our collaboration is like a relay race, where you can hand off something you are working on a colleague when you finish your day and then when you come back in the morning, it's already moved forward because they've been in another time zone doing stuff while you were sleeping, and vice versa. And I think we're very good at making this shared impact.

This global collaboration is really valuable because it gives us this diversity of thought in approaching problems. We believe in the power of diversity. It's important because the diversity of thought is really how ultimately, we can find the best solutions to questions.

I think also it's only really through diversity of thought and approach that we can avoid catastrophic mistakes, because that tends to happen when everybody's thinking the same way - no one else is considering other angles of the situation and then things can really get missed.

Our Translational Medicine team is a group that is high performing. Many people in the group are very experienced physicians and have had quite significant careers before they've joined Novartis, and they bring such a wealth of life experience and career and scientific insights. They're very inspiring people to interact with and be around and to learn and grow from.

I think that the science at Novartis is really astounding in terms of the depth of expertise and understanding that our scientists have. It's a bit of a luxury in a way to have so many talented, dedicated and knowledgeable people in different functions that you can pull together to make new medicines that change people's lives.

You don't find that everywhere.

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