

Laudatory speech for Prof. Dr. Didier Pittet

by Prof. Dr. Jörg Hacker

[Check against delivery.]

[Dear]

I am delighted to be giving the laudatory speech for Professor Didier Pittet today, this year's winner of the Robert Koch Award for Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention. This award honours work in the field of the practical control of infections, particularly hospital infections, and research work aiming to inhibit these hospital events. In past years, the award has been presented to Professor Karch and Professor Gastmeier. This year, it goes to Professor Didier Pittet. My heartfelt congratulations!

"Saving lives by washing hands", the work for which Mr Pittet is receiving the award, is probably best summed up by this brief sentence. Mr Pittet is following in the tradition of the great microbiologists, such as Ignaz Semmelweis, who was one of the first people to raise the alarm about hospital-associated infections, and whose studies also covered puerperal fever.

Robert Koch, too, repeatedly highlighted the practical necessity of hygiene and microbiology. To this extent, the presentation of the Robert Koch Award for Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention is an event that is embedded in a long tradition of microbiological research. From my perspective, there are three notable points that emerge in particular when one considers Mr Pittet's scientific oeuvre.

First, he succeeded in significantly reducing the number of hospital-associated infections through the systematic application of hygiene measures. The reduction in the Geneva University Hospitals alone was up to 50%, with a particularly strong reduction precisely in the methicillin-resistant *staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) infections. These successes can be traced back to the consistent application of the rules developed by Mr Pittet.

Here, a second aspect of Didier Pittet's work comes into play: the thorough scientific basis for his studies. He has succeeded in creating reference values for successful disinfection through precise quantitative analyses. These empirical studies make Mr Pittet's work

particularly valuable. At the same time, he has been able to publish his work in the best journals of the world, including the “Lancet” and other publishing organs. He also had no qualms, as he once reported, about going into the operating theatre himself with a stop watch in order to check how long staff took to wash their hands. He then optimised disinfection solutions one step at a time, using mainly alcoholic preparations.

A third point should be emphasised: Didier Pittet conducted his work on a strictly international basis. We all know that microbes know no boundaries, and this also applies to hospital-associated pathogens. Mr Pittet has also earned his reputation as the “exporter” of the Geneva hand hygiene model. Here, he worked in particular with the World Health Organisation, the WHO, where he has been actively involved since 2005. He also repeatedly organised cooperation with foreign partners himself. As a result, an increasing number of hospitals signed up for his Geneva hand hygiene model. In Germany, too, the highly successful campaign “Aktion saubere Hände” (Clean Hands Initiative) can partly also be traced back to Mr Pittet’s work.

The reason why he views the world solely in international, global terms, is possibly due to the fact that he grew up in the international city of Geneva. He also went to school and studied medicine here. He very soon began to dedicate his work to the fight against hospital-associated microbes. In 1992, he became director of the “Hospital Infection Control Programme” at the University of Geneva. Here, he also intensively pursued his teaching work. In 2000, Didier Pittet became a professor, and in 2010, he was made a full professor at the Geneva University Hospitals. He was also awarded a series of fellowships, enabling him to gain further qualifications. From 1983 to 1986, for example, he worked at the Department for Internal Medicine in Geneva, which was managed by the well-known, successful infection specialist François Waldvogel. From 1990 to 1992, he gained experience at Iowa Hospital.

Naturally, Didier Pittet has received many awards. The extent of his international network is underscored by the fact that he received three honorary professorships in China (in 2005 in Hong Kong, in 2006 in Shanghai and in 2013 in Chengdu). He has also been a visiting professor at Imperial College London since 2003. Didier Pittet has received a long and impressive list of awards. Here, I would like to mention in particular the Semmelweis Research Prize and the Hygiene Prize awarded by the Rudolf Schülke Foundation, both from 1999. Mr Pittet has also been presented with the Award of Excellence in Clinical Biology and Infectious Diseases of the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, and in 2007 was made an Honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

Today, dear Mr Pittet, we are delighted to honour you with the Robert Koch Award for Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention. Once again, my heartfelt congratulations!