

## **Welcome address by Dr. Hubertus Erlen**

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It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this year's award ceremony for the 2014 Robert Koch Award and the Robert-Koch Gold Medal. I am delighted to see so many of you have accepted our invitation.

I take special pleasure in welcoming the winners of this year's Robert Koch Award, Professor Casanova and Professor Fischer.

Professor Casanova and Professor Fischer, it is a great pleasure for me to welcome you both on behalf of the Robert Koch Foundation. Today we wish to honour your outstanding achievements in science with the Robert Koch Prize 2014.

It is also a great pleasure for me to welcome Professor Bujard. Professor Bujard, today we wish to honour your outstanding lifetime work with the Robert Koch Gold Medal.

I also warmly welcome Madam State Secretary Widmann-Mauz and the delegation from the Ministry of Health.

Finally, I would like to heartily welcome the President of the Robert Koch Institute, Professor Burger.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have received a great deal of tragic news from West Africa over the last few weeks and months. The outbreak of an Ebola epidemic in West Africa has been the subject of a lot of attention in the global press. The sickness of a few individuals has rapidly grown into a global threat.

The terrible toll already taken by this epidemic includes thousands of deaths in West African countries, immeasurable suffering of families and orphaned children, totally overtaxed national health systems and an almost complete stoppage of public life and commercial activities in the affected regions.

The industrialised countries have taken far too long to recognise that the virus is not impeded by national or international borders.

A number of aid organisations have rapidly responded to the situation in West Africa but the sheer scale of the problem has prevented them from providing complete coverage of all affected areas. These aid organisations have complained that measures to provide the necessary massive levels of aid from Europe and the United States have taken much too long to get underway. Fortunately, this situation now seems to be changing.

Containing the epidemic through appropriate hygienic measures is certainly important and the right way to start. However, the West African countries are not able to do this by themselves, which is why massive amounts of aid from the Western countries are so important.

We also know that long-term protection of the population in general, and the committed helpers in particular, is only possible with vaccines and therapeutics. Unfortunately, these are not yet available. Only medical research and the development of effective medication can help and we are all hoping for progress in this area.

Ladies and gentlemen, the dramatic states of emergency in the Ebola crisis regions recapitulate the importance of maintaining our efforts to provide medical professionals with a constant supply of new resources for fighting sickness and infection.

We should remember that this new threat posed by the Ebola virus is not the only danger to the health of the general population, in both underdeveloped and developed countries alike. Over 100 years have passed since the groundbreaking discoveries of Robert Koch but old enemies such as tuberculosis, malaria, cholera or polio are far from being eradicated.

New threats are also making their presence felt:

in addition to Ebola, other examples are HIV/AIDS and new strains of the Influenza virus.

We are currently also discovering that many of our proven weapons have lost their edge: bacteria with multiple resistance to existing antibiotics are appearing ever more frequently, but new antibiotics are becoming ever more seldom.

It is the responsibility and duty of the industrialised countries to continue using their scientific and economic potential for this battle against old and new sicknesses. It is comforting to know that our government is fully aware of this responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, the scientists dedicated to medical research obviously need a solid material foundation and the best possible working conditions conducive to their research.

Above and beyond this, they also need the encouragement and orientation provided by those who set an example and lead the way. The aim of the work performed by the Robert Koch Foundation and the presentation of our awards, is to highlight and honour recent outstanding achievements and thus provide motivation, inspiration and orientation for predominantly younger scientists.

The scientists to whom we shall pay tribute today are exemplary role models for young scientists.

With this in mind, we wish to honour the achievements of Professor Casanova and Professor Fischer, two scientists who have performed groundbreaking work on understanding host genes and their products in infectious diseases.

Professor Casanova and his colleagues have discovered “holes” in the immune systems of otherwise healthy children that make them susceptible to specific, sometimes life-threatening infectious diseases. This has great importance for the field of molecular diagnosis and for the development of targeted therapies using recombinant cytokines.

Professor Fischer is also occupied with discovering “holes” or switching errors in the immune system, in the area of congenital immune defects. He is regarded as a pioneer in the field of gene therapy and was the first scientist to successfully employ gene therapy in treating young patients with severe combined immunodeficiency. Professor Casanova and Professor Fischer, I congratulate you most warmly on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Robert Koch Foundation on being awarded the Robert Koch Prize 2014.

We all look forward to Professor Hoffmann’s expert analysis of your outstanding scientific achievements.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year we are pleased to once again award the Robert Koch Gold Medal in recognition of the lifetime work of an outstanding scientist. Today we wish to honour Professor Bujard, who has been researching the mechanisms controlling the activity of genes as well as their practical implementation for combating infectious diseases since the 1980s. We also wish to honour his dedication, commitment and achievements in malaria infection research and the development of a malaria vaccine. Professor Bujard, in the name of the Board of Directors of the Robert Koch Foundation, I offer my warmest congratulations on receiving the Robert Koch Gold Medal. Professor Hengge will later provide us with a detailed overview of your impressive scientific life’s work.

Ladies and gentlemen, young persons committing their lives to a career in science certainly need a great deal of courage and optimism. They require the capacity to believe in the discovery of something new, something as yet unknown, and the ability to remain undiscouraged by setbacks.

Entirely in the tradition of the man from whom it takes its name, the Robert Koch Foundation is committed to the encouragement and promotion of young scientists on their long and arduous career path. This is why we also wish to acknowledge the work of young scientists who have already made promising scientific achievements.

This year we honour the following winners with post-doctoral prizes:

Dr. Benedikt Kaufer from the Freie Universität Berlin

Dr. Tim Lämmermann from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in Bethesda, United States and

Dr. Kai Papenfort from Princeton University.

Dr. Kaufer, Dr. Lämmermann and Dr. Papenfort, I would like to convey the warmest congratulations of the Board of Directors on receiving this award for your work, which will be honoured in more detail by Professor Hacker later.

Ladies and gentlemen, our annual award ceremony also offers me the chance to deeply thank all those who have supported the work of our foundation over the past year. Again in this year we have many reasons to thank you all, because the work performed by the Robert Koch Foundation is only possible through the support provided by numerous persons, companies and institutions.

I would first like to thank the delegation from the Ministry of Health for their advisory assistance and financial support.

Madam State Secretary Widmann-Mauz, we greatly appreciate the fact that the Ministry contributes half of the € 100,000 prize money associated with the Robert Koch Award each year and we know that this is not occur as a matter of course.

I would like to thank the member companies and representatives of the Association of Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies, who have been one of our most important partners for many years and who also provide substantial financial support.

I also wish to thank all the members of our Board of Trustees, who support us so generously, and all our other supporters and members who have remained faithful.

You can all rest assured that the Board of Directors is very conscious of the great responsibility incumbent in the use of subsidies and contributions. As always, all donations are used exclusively for pursuing the scientific goals of the Foundation, since the administrative costs are kindly carried by the Bayer AG and the Commerzbank AG.

I would therefore like to warmly thank the representatives of these companies, Mr Müller and Professor Plischke, for their support.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of the Scientific Advisory Council who have willingly donated many hours of their precious time free of charge. The Foundation would be unable to achieve its goals without the immense knowledge and commitment of these individuals.

Ladies and gentlemen, in closing I wish to deeply thank all of you for your interest in the Foundation. I would also like to warmly invite all those present who are not yet members to join our Foundation. Our very low annual membership fee is really not an insurmountable barrier for membership. This is a concrete way of demonstrating your support for the goals of our Foundation. Membership forms will be freely available after the ceremony.

On passing the microphone to Professor Hacker, so that he can present this year's post-doctoral awards, I would like to express the pleasure enjoyed by the entire Board of Directors of the Foundation on learning that he was appointed to the Scientific Advisory Board for the Secretary-General of the United Nations at the beginning of this year.

I would like to once again congratulate you warmly on this great honour Professor Hacker.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.