

## EDITORIAL

**A prize for global health in the name of Rudolf Virchow**

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1 It was recently announced that the 2023 Virchow Prize for  
2 Global Health will be bestowed upon Professor Rose Gana  
3 Fomban Leke, from Cameroon, in recognition of her distinctive  
4 and exceptional lifetime achievements in strengthening  
5 global health, pioneering infectious disease research that  
6 recognises the need to re-think malaria as a societal and  
7 development problem beyond the purely biomedical lens to  
8 achieve a malaria-free world and her relentless dedication in  
9 advancing gender equality (1). The award ceremony will take  
10 place under the High Patronage of the President of the German  
11 Parliament, Bärbel Bas, at Berlin City Hall on October 14 this  
12 year, the eve of the World Health Summit opening.

13 This is the second time the Virchow Prize has been conferred  
14 to honour contributions to global health. The inaugural award  
15 was given to Dr John Nkengasong in October 2022 (2).

16 Thus, the Virchow Prize for Global Health is still in its  
17 beginning, and it would seem opportune to reflect on the moti-  
18 vation for this prize and its coupling to the eminent scientist  
19 and physician Rudolf Virchow.

### 21 **Rudolf Virchow-a trailblazer for global health**

22  
23 Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902) was ahead of his time. He was  
24 highly interested in the most advanced scientific methods in  
25 optics, biology, physics, and chemistry but also in anthropology,  
26 archaeology, ethnology, and other emerging sciences. Virchow  
27 used many of these methods to develop a new concept of health  
28 and disease. In addition, he strongly emphasized the importance  
29 of social, cultural, political, and economic factors in deter-  
30 mining health outcomes, famously stating that 'Medicine is a  
31 social science, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a

large scale.' He became an influential member of the German  
Parliament and opposed military actions. Virchow's work  
emphasized that health disparities are often rooted in broader  
societal inequities, including poverty, lack of education, social  
injustices, regional as well as national prejudice.

Now, more than a centennial later, we see how Rudolf  
Virchow's thoughts have been brought forward and inspired  
the discourse on the social and political determinants of health.  
The United Nations 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable  
Development Goals (SDGs), unanimously adopted by all  
member states in September 2015, represents in many ways  
a belated recognition of the radical and far-reaching thoughts  
that Virchow espoused in the 19th century. And if ever in  
doubt: the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the gross inequities  
that continue to haunt global health. These disparities-deep-  
ened under the pandemic-tell us in no uncertain terms that  
we must go beyond the realm of biomedicine to secure better  
health for all.

The Virchow Prize for Global Health was established to  
honour 'significant contributions towards strengthening global  
health through lifetime achievements and long-standing  
engagement'. In the spirit of Rudolf Virchow, the prize is  
designed to recognize initiatives that not only address medical  
and direct health interventions but also tackle the underlying  
cultural, social, economic, commercial, and political determi-  
nants of health inequities. This approach aligns with Virchow's  
perspective and is meant to reward as well as encourage  
a comprehensive strategy to improve and promote health  
while reducing disparities, requiring a close multisectoral  
cooperation and joint engagement across silos and disciplines.

### 63 **The establishment of the prize and its governance structure**

64  
65 It is logical that the initiative for a prize in the name of Rudolf  
66 Virchow was taken in Germany. The Virchow Prize is initiated  
67 and carried by the Virchow Foundation for Global Health, an  
68 independent non-profit foundation under civic law. It was estab-  
69 lished out of civil society engagement on October 13, 2021,  
70 which marks the 200th birthday of the foundation's and  
71 award's namesake. The Presidents of the National Academy  
72 of Sciences Leopoldina and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy  
73 of Sciences and Humanities were among the founders, and

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1 the prize was established under the High Patronage of the  
2 President of the Federal Republic of Germany (2022) and of  
3 the President of the German Parliament (2023).

4 The Virchow Foundation and its independence, its governance  
5 and its compliance with the respective laws and the fulfilment of  
6 the foundation's purpose laid down in the statutes (3) are over-  
7 seen by the responsible German governmental authority.

8 The Virchow Foundation's council is composed of members  
9 from around the globe with expertise across disciplines and  
10 sectors (academia, civil society, politics, private sector). The  
11 council provides impetus and consultancy for the founda-  
12 tion's work to achieve its goals. The council of the Virchow  
13 Foundation nominates and appoints the independent Virchow  
14 Prize Committee which selects the Virchow Prize for Global  
15 Health laureates. None of the founders are represented in the  
16 council. Thus, the Virchow Prize Committee is effectively  
17 isolated from the founders of the Virchow Foundation and  
18 independent from the board of trustees.

19 The composition of the prize committee duly reflects the  
20 global perspective of the prize, with its social, professional, and  
21 geographical diversity. As is customary for other major interna-  
22 tional prizes, the prize committee is autonomous and loyal only to  
23 the eligibility criteria which are to be found in the public domain.

## 24 **The eligibility criteria**

25 Virchow Prize laureates are recognized and distinguished  
26 for their lifetime achievements in the broad area of global  
27 health and the related SDGs. The specific eligibility  
28 criteria—one or several of which must be met by the successful  
29 candidate—therefore emphasize the cross-sectoral and inter-  
30 disciplinary approach to health. The prize can be awarded to  
31 individuals, institutions, or organisations that

- 32 • have made outstanding contributions to improve global  
33 health, be it through scientific, societal, technological, political,  
34 or economic innovations, and by applying concepts of social,  
35 educational, behavioural, environmental, economic, commer-  
36 cial and/or policymaking-related determinants of health, have  
37 significantly contributed to the attainment of the United Nations  
38 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals, with special  
39 attention made to SDG 3 'Good Health and Well-Being for All'  
40 and its intersectionality with others of the 17 SDGs,

- 41 • have developed and/or implemented health-improving  
42 innovations or interventions, governance, and policies with the  
43 potential for broad impact on equity,

- 44 • have identified and addressed systemic factors leading to  
45 increased prevention measures and improved access to medi-  
46 cines, vaccines, therapeutics, or treatments,

- 47 • have contributed to the advancement of research or led to  
48 the discovery of disease origins, treatment or prevention which  
49 impact global health,

- 50 • have significantly contributed to increasing global coop-  
51 eration and inclusivity in addressing holistic approaches to  
52 global and planetary health challenges.

53 The work recognized by the Virchow Prize must rest on  
54 a fundament of human rights, solidarity, and equity and be  
55 rooted in research and academic values.

56 The first two awardees were selected based on these  
57 eligibility criteria. Both Virchow Prize Laureates have made  
58 seminal contributions to global health by addressing health  
59 inequities across several dimensions, with a firm basis in  
60 research and education.

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63 There is a challenge to identify the worthiest candidates in  
64 such a complex and wide landscape as global health, including  
65 nexuses such as 'One Health', 'climate & health', 'agrisciences,  
66 nutrition & health', 'education & health', 'water, sanitation &  
67 health'. To secure the broad coverage of the Virchow Prize,  
68 nominations are invited across every area of global health.

## 69 **The long-term impact of the Virchow Prize**

70 The Virchow Prize for Global Health has the potential to  
71 address and reduce health inequities on a global scale in  
72 several ways. The prize invites the international community  
73 to recognize and celebrate individuals, organisations, or initia-  
74 tives that improve global health, address health inequities, and  
75 reach underserved populations and minorities.

76 This recognition can motivate others to join the cause and  
77 invest in similar initiatives. Identifying and honouring person-  
78 alities or institutions that have such a holistic view on health  
79 and within one person or one organisation unify such a broad  
80 spectrum of sectors, disciplines and science may help to better  
81 understand the complex problems and encourage optimism  
82 and productive actions.

83 An international prize at this level will promote the sharing  
84 of knowledge and best practices among different global health  
85 initiatives, and winners of the prize are expected to serve as  
86 global health ambassadors, sharing their experiences and strat-  
87 egies with other organisations, governments, and communities.

88 The prize is young. Several years will elapse and many  
89 more awardees will have to be identified before the profile  
90 of the prize can be fully appreciated. Obviously, the prize  
91 is meant to honour achievements in global health across all  
92 disciplines, targeting both infectious and non-communicable  
93 diseases, and the prize committee is attentive to the fact  
94 that we find ourselves in an era of parallel health crises, and  
95 more than this, of a polycrisis where health is challenged by  
96 such diverse factors as climate and conflicts, resource- and  
97 food shortages, pollution and poverty, and antimicrobial  
98 resistance.

99 It is hoped that the Virchow Prize for Global Health will  
100 draw attention to the issue of health inequities, raising public  
101 awareness and encouraging governments, policymakers, and  
102 organisations to take action. The prize should inspire and serve  
103 as a catalyst for progress. The coupling to the name and work  
104 of Rudolf Virchow should help us realize this ambitious goal.

## 105 **Conflict of interest**

106 The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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