



Press Release

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Saving lives by cleaning hands

The Swiss medical expert Didier Pittet receives the 2017 Robert Koch Award for Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention

25 years ago, the award-winner laid the foundation for one of the most successful WHO patient protection campaigns.

For his ground-breaking achievements in the promotion of better hand hygiene to prevent nosocomial infections, Professor Didier Pittet will be awarded the Robert Koch Foundation Award for Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention 2017. Following Professor Helge Karch (Münster) and Professor Petra Gastmeier (Berlin), Pittet, who is head of the department for hospital hygiene at the Geneva University Hospitals and the lead advisor of the WHO "Clean Care is Safer Care" program, is the third award-winner of the prize, which was created in 2013, and which is worth 50,000 euros. "Through his tireless commitment and enthusiasm, the award-winner has made a key contribution towards making his 'Geneva hand hygiene model' a global standard," explains Hubertus Erlen, Chairman of the Board of Directors at the Robert Koch Foundation. The award ceremony will be held on Wednesday, September 20, 2017 at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Millions of people die each year from what are known as "nosocomial" infections, which they contract in clinics or care homes. In the United States alone, the number could even be up to 200,000 annually, according to Pittet: "That is about the same number of people who would die if a jumbo jet were to go down every day." Even so, the Swiss medical expert can be proud of what he has already achieved. The WHO campaign which he heads, "Clean Care is Safer Care", claims to save between five and eight million human lives every year. Under the slogan "SAVE LIVES: Clean Your Hands", the campaign has made improved hand hygiene a key demand. There are now national campaigns in more than 50 countries, such as "Aktion Saubere Hände", "Mission Mains Propres" or "STOP! Clean your hands". Almost 20,000 hospitals and health care institutions in 177 countries or regions – from A (e.g. Afghanistan) to Z (e.g. Zimbabwe) – have signed up as registered participants to firmly integrate systematic hand disinfection into everyday clinical life. For Didier Pittet, however, this does not mean that he can rest on his laurels: "Our aim is to ensure that every individual hospital throughout the world joins our campaign."

Exactly 25 years ago, in 1992, as the new director of the Program for Infection Control at the Geneva University Hospitals, Didier Pittet was confronted for the first time in a position of responsibility with the problem of inadequate hand hygiene. He wanted to understand why, 150 years after the introduction of hand disinfection by Ignaz Semmelweis, compliance still left so much to be desired. Here, there was one

Robert-Koch-Stiftung e.V.

Müllerstraße 178
Postfach RKS
13342 Berlin
Germany

Telefon: +49 30 – 468 11 599
Fax: +49 30 – 468 18 195

info@robert-koch-stiftung.de
www.robert-koch-stiftung.de

Vorsitzender:

Dr. Hubertus Erlen
ehem. Vorsitzender des Vorstands
Schering AG

Stellvertretender Vorsitzender:

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Jörg Hacker
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Bundesministerium für Gesundheit

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Stefan H. E. Kaufmann
Direktor am Max-Planck-Institut
für Infektionsbiologie

Bankverbindung:

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lesson that he learned in particular, and that was that regulations alone are not sufficient to persuade people to do something that they in fact know to be correct and sensible. “Think of cars and safety belts! Just having a safety belt in your car doesn’t necessarily mean that you will also use it!”

At that time, people were still using soap and water to wash their hands, which could take up one to two minutes of their time. Pittet sat down in the intensive care unit with a click counter. He came to the conclusion that an intensive care nurse, with her large number of patient contacts, would spend almost half her working hours washing her hands if she were to adhere strictly to the regulations. Pittet then introduced an alcohol-based handrub agent at the Geneva Hospital. It took just 10 to 15 seconds, or a maximum of 30 seconds, to rub it into your hands. It was also far more effective in killing bacteria on the skin than standard soap. Pittet made the alcohol solution generally available, and dispensers were installed next to patient beds in all wards. All doctors and care workers were also given small bottles for their white coats. Everywhere on the clinic floors, posters designed by the staff themselves were put up, which showed how to disinfect your hands correctly.

The scheme quickly proved successful. Compliance with regard to hand hygiene increased from 48% to 66%, according to the result of a study published by the “Lancet” journal in 2000 on the basis of more than 20,000 observed situations that required hand hygiene measures. The rate of nosocomial infections decreased by more than 40 percent over a period of three years; in terms of infections through methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), there was even a reduction of over 50 percent. Hundreds of lives were saved in this way – with millions of euros in financial savings.

The example took hold. In 2004, Britain became the first country to promote the “Geneva Hand Hygiene Model” in all hospitals. Not long afterwards, Professor Pittet took over the role of external lead of the WHO program “Clean Care is Safer Care”. Together with international experts, global guidelines were formulated, which are oriented to the multi-modal strategy developed in Geneva. The most important disinfection movements were clearly illustrated on large-format posters in many different languages and dialects, which also took into account different cultural and religious contexts. As Didier Pittet knows: “Respect for religious backgrounds and cultural diversity is the key to success”.

In 2014, the alcohol-based handrub solution was added to the WHO list of “essential medicines”. In order to reduce costs, particularly for poorer regions, Didier Pittet, together with expert colleagues, developed a license-free formula which could be used in what were now more than 60 countries to produce the so-called “WHO alcohol-based formulation” based on bioethanol obtained from agricultural crops such as sugarcane, maize, manioc, rice or potatoes. Such products, which were available locally almost free of charge, were also used during the latest Ebola outbreak in Liberia.

In his book published in 2014, “Le geste qui sauve” (“Clean hands save lives”), the French publicist Thierry Crouzet describes the pioneering work of Professor Didier Pittet. In the foreword, the former Director General of the WHO, Margaret Chan, and Sir Liam Donaldson, Chairman of the World Alliance for Patient Safety, called him an “inspiring and inspired pioneer”, who “with the support of the WHO realized his dream of saving people’s lives throughout the world through clean hands”.



Information on the award

In Germany, approximately 500,000 patients contract hospital infections each year. This statistic indicates that advanced medicine has reached its limits. Improvements in the implementation of hospital hygiene and the development of new strategies in therapy and the prevention of nosocomial infections are urgently needed. This is why the Robert Koch Foundation introduced the Prize for Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention two years ago, with the aim of drawing attention to exemplary achievements in the field of hospital hygiene and infection prevention. It is intended to serve as an incentive to improve the standard of hygiene in our hospitals through new scientific and application-oriented projects.

The Prize is financially supported by B. Braun Melsungen AG and BARMER.

Note to editors:

Photo and CV of Didier Pittet can be found at www.robert-koch-stiftung.de/awardforhygiene2017

About the Robert Koch Foundation

Founded in 1907, the Robert Koch Foundation is a non-profit foundation dedicated to the promotion of medical progress and is based in Berlin. It promotes basic scientific research in the field of infectious diseases, as well as exemplary projects that address medical and hygienic issues.

The Foundation confers a number of distinguished scientific awards each year: the Robert Koch Award – one of Germany's most distinguished scientific awards, the Robert Koch Gold Medal, three awards for young scientists and, for the first time in 2013, the Hospital Hygiene and Infection Prevention Award.

Robert Koch (1843 – 1910), after whom the award is named, was the founder of modern-day bacteriology, for which he was awarded the 1905 Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology. From 1891 until his retirement in 1904, Koch was Head of the Institute for Infectious Diseases in Berlin.

Contact:

Christine Howarth, Tel. +49 (0)30-468-11599, email: info@robert-koch-stiftung.de