

ROBERT - KOCH - STIFTUNG e . V .

Conferment of the Robert Koch Prize

and the Robert Koch Medal in Gold

November 11, 2011

Laudatio

for

Prof. Dr. Ernst Ludwig Winnacker

by Prof. Dr. Drs. h. c. Jörg Hacker

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für Infektionsbiologie

[Check against delivery.]

Madame State Secretary,
dear Mr Ehrlen,
dear Mr. Winnacker,
dear colleagues!

“He has written numerous popular books about genes, clones, biotechnologies and diseases. He has, without doubt, become one of the most sought-after scientists in the country.” That is what the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote a few weeks ago in connection with an article about Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker. And indeed, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker is one of Germany and Europe’s most distinguished scholars, reason enough for us to pay tribute to him today with the Robert Koch Gold Medal.

In order to acknowledge the true value of this honour, I would like to address three aspects of Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker’s work. To begin with, there is his work in the field of molecular biology. Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker studied chemistry in Zurich and developed an interest in life sciences at an early stage. He devoted his subsequent studies and scientific work in Berkeley and at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm to the pursuit of questions in connection with cell differentiation, the propagation of genetic material, replication and virus-host interaction. Especially this work, which includes the replication of adenoviruses and the relevance of these organisms for gene therapy, has become a set point of reference in the respective field. His work also demonstrates the outstanding services he has rendered to infection research, the very foundation of Robert Koch’s scientific work. Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker was then called to Munich where he continued to address the fundamental issues of molecular biology, including the issue of prions and their role in morbid processes. Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker never lost sight of fundamental processes, which he analysed with the greatest amount of precision and originality.

But, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker not only devoted time to his own scientific work, he also - and I now come to the second aspect of his activities - applied himself to furthering the cause of the scientific community as a whole and even made it his concern to ensure that scientific work was possible in the first place. Asked recently by *Focus* magazine, of which of his achievements he was particularly proud, he replied “The establishment of the Gene Centre in Munich.” And indeed, in Germany, he was exemplary for this form of scientific work that allowed young and talented scientist to be independent at an early stage. In his capacity as President of the German Research Foundation one of his first priorities was always to support young scientists.

This has been an important factor in the excellence initiative, which is currently in the second round, and which essentially bears the hallmark of Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker. Following this time with the DFG, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker took up the post of General Secretary of the European Research Council; a position from which he was able to ensure that science was possible at the European level. It was here, with the development of the ERC, that he made a lasting contribution by enabling competitive basic research in the European Research Area. He continued to pursue his aim of enabling excellent research during his time as General Secretary of the Human Frontier Science Program, a position that he has held for the last two years. This illustrious institution for research funding now also bears the hallmark of Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker.

And there is a third aspect which I would like to address. A periodical once referred to Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker as “the messenger from the ivory tower.” At a time when the wider public did not easily understand science, he was writing popular books that made molecular biology a competitive option for the features sections of newspapers. In books and articles with titles such as, *On The Thread Of Life*, *From Genes to Clones* or *Viruses – The Secret Rulers of the World* he was making science accessible to a wide audience, as well as confronting the general public with science policy and the ethics of science.

The ethical aspects of molecular biology, in particular, have always been a driving force in Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker’s work. He has had a determining influence on public discussions on the subject both as a member of the German Parliament’s Enquête Commission on genetic engineering and in his capacity of President of the DFG, as well as numerous other functions. Whether on green genetic engineering, whether stem cells, whether questions about scientific integrity and how to deal with plagiarism, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker always had something to say on the matter; when we consider the origin of the word ‘professor’, profiteri – spread the word - then he is certainly a professor in the best possible sense of the word.

Before awarding the Robert-Koch Medal in gold, I would like to add a few personal details about the winner. You were born in Cologne during the war and studied, as already mentioned, in Zurich before going on to Berkeley and Stockholm. You were also at the University of Cologne, which, at that time, was an important research centre for molecular biology. You have been the recipient of so many awards and honours that it would be impossible to name them all here. But I would like to mention the Bavarian Order of Merit and admission into the Bavarian Order of Maximilian, the award of the Grand Cross with Star and, two years ago, the Order of Merit by the Leopoldina, as well as numerous honours bestowed by other countries. These honours, whether they be from Poland, Japan or China, are testimony to the high esteem in which you are held at international level.

Friedrich Schleiermacher once wrote, “Science and truth are not the absolute, but they arise from it.” It is therefore vital that there are still people who draw our attention to science and truth. One of these people is Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker and I am in no doubt that we will continue to hear his voice in this context in the future. Congratulations on the award of the Robert Koch Gold Medal.