

Immunology / Immunologie

Frontiers in microbiology and infectious diseases. Welcome address [☆]

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, I would like to welcome all of you to the inter-academic symposium on *Frontiers in microbiology and infectious diseases*. We are very grateful to our colleagues from the French Academy of Sciences who have taken the initiative and organized this symposium. It is a follow-up meeting to our joint meeting that was held at the University of Würzburg in Germany last year. In Würzburg, we came together to discuss aspects of the ‘threat of infection’ of microbes with high pathogenic potential and, in particular, we dealt with the topics of:

- political and social aspects of infectious diseases;
- mechanisms of genome flexibility;
- pathogenicity;
- host–pathogen interaction and host specificity as well as prevention and therapy.

However, during the meeting, it became obvious that it would be worthwhile, not only to evaluate microbes of high pathogenic potential, but to include other pathogens, as well as microbe–host interactions, in the discussion. Therefore, the idea was born to have another symposium on infectious diseases in the future.

Jörg Hacker and I were very pleased when Pascale Cossart and Philippe Sansonetti suggested to us to organize such a meeting in Paris. Indeed, we were surprised

that this idea of a follow-up meeting materialized so quickly, and I would like to thank both colleagues, and Gérard Orth, for this initiative and their work to put together such a very interesting and challenging scientific programme for the next few days.

As a spin-off of the Würzburg meeting, a working group of experts was put together to prepare a report on *Infectious Diseases – Importance of coordinated activity in Europe* for EASAC, the European Academy Science Advisory Council. EASAC is a means for the science academies of the EU to work together to provide expert independent advice at the European level about the scientific aspects of public policy issues.

This report highlights the priority for EU action on infectious diseases and was recently presented to the EU parliament and the EU commission. Since this report is written as an introduction to a broad range of key issues to infectious diseases, EASAC will continue to work on this topic and is now initiating specific projects in priority areas of infections.

Therefore, our symposium here will be of great value, not only to those who are actively engaged in research projects discussed at this symposium, but also to participants who are advising EASAC.

Since probably some of the participants are not familiar with our academy, I would like to provide some information on the history and structure of the Leopoldina.

Our academy is the oldest one in the German speaking countries, i.e. Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and one of the oldest academies of the world. The academy was founded in 1652 by four physicians of the Free City of Schweinfurt near Würzburg. The goal of the Foundation was to improve knowledge of medical sciences for the individual scholar as well as for the public by exploring nature for the benefit of the human being. These

[☆] The inter-academic colloquium ‘*Les défis de la microbiologie et des maladies infectieuses* / Frontiers in Microbiology and Infectious Diseases’ was held on 13–16 September 2005 at the ‘Institut de France’, Paris, under the auspices of the ‘Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina’, Germany, the Academy of Medical Sciences, UK, the ‘Académie nationale de médecine’, France, and the ‘Académie des sciences’, France.

goals have been maintained up to the present time. For more than 200 years, the seat of the Leopoldina shifted to free imperial cities and the university locations in accordance to where the respective president happened to be based. Since 1878, the academy has been permanently located in the university city of Halle, a town which is close to Leipzig.

It is obvious, that over 350 years, the Leopoldina has been afflicted by historic events. In particular, under dictatorial regimes, the Leopoldina was suffering during the Nazi time and after the war, when Germany was divided into West and East Germany, by the GDR regime. However, the Leopoldina survived in its structure and managed to maintain its international connection due to outstanding presidents and members. They fought very hard, but effectively, for independence.

After the reunification in 1990, our academy was reorganized and the present structure is as follows:

- the number of elected members is restricted to 1100, but this number refers to fellows less than 75 years of age. Therefore, the whole *corpus academicum* will be about 25 per cent larger. About 60 fellows can be elected annually;
- the academy holds 28 scientific sections, grouped in natural sciences such as chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology and technical sciences, as well as medicine and empirical humanities. Two thirds of the members come from the German-speaking countries: Germany, Switzerland and Austria, one third from more than 30 other countries throughout the world.

The aims of the academy are directed:

- to the promotion of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary discussions;
- to the distribution of general scientific knowledge to the public;
- to act as an advisory council for government and public administration in science policy;
- to the promotion of young scientists;
- to maintain relationships with national and international academies of sciences.

The symposium today is an example of how the academy supports scientific exchange and interdisciplinary discussion and collaborates with other European academies. I am grateful to the French Academy of Sciences to be our host and I do hope we will have other joint activities and meetings in the future.

I wish you all a successful symposium with the presentation of new findings as well as interesting discussions to the promotion of your own research.

Volker ter Meulen

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