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Eur Addict Res 1996;2:68-69

On the Retirement of Prof. Dr. Dr. Ambros Uchtenhagen

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1995 will be an important year for social psychiatry in Switzerland and in Europe. Ambros Uchtenhagen, one of the most productive and innovative researchers, will retire and leave the University of Zurich. It is therefore time to remember his extraordinary career as a great psychiatrist.

Ambros Uchtenhagen was born in Basel in 1928; he attended school in Basel and Freiburg i.Br., studied philosophy, history of art and sociology in Zurich and graduated with a PhD in 1954. Thereafter he studied medicine in Zurich until 1959; following specialist training as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, he graduated as a doctor of medicine in 1963. In the same year he became a senior physician at the Psychiatric University Clinic in Zurich under Manfred Bleuler.

Since 1970, his main interest has been the new social psychiatric service of the Psychiatric University Clinic, which became an independent division of the clinic in 1974. As its first director, he established several well-known innovative services.

In 1975 he entered the Zurich Faculty of Medicine for psychiatry, in particular social psychiatry, and in 1977 he became associated professor for social psychiatry. Together with the two other clinic directors, Ernst and Angst, he was in charge of undergraduate and post-graduate teaching. In 1992 he became full professor for social psychiatry.

Subsequently Uchtenhagen established an interdisciplinary research and documentation group and a bibliographic research service for all aspects of social psychiatry. Uchtenhagen's research focused on the course of illness and the evaluation of psychosis and addiction disorders.

In 1976 he started a cohort study on the course of opiate dependency in all regions of Switzerland, financed by the Swiss National Fund. The study was followed by a systematic documentation of the course and linked with therapeutic institutions for drug addicts. This data pool permits specific studies on aetiology, influence of course and of behaviour with respect to risk of HIV infection.

Since 1986 he has participated in multi-state studies of the European Community (epidemiology of addictive disorders, epidemiology of HIV infection and risk behaviour among drug users). Uchtenhagen has been a scientific advisor to the WHO since 1975 (epidemiological field studies, preparation for and contributions to closed meetings of experts on drug dependency and social psychiatric care in Europe, the USA, Latin America, Asia and Africa). He is a member of the WHO Expert Advisory Panel on Drug Dependence and Alcohol Problems. At the national level, he is a member of the Federal Narcotics Commission and of the Subcommission for Drug Issues. This has led to specific research on behalf of the Federal Office of Public Health in the field of narcotics legislation and dependency patterns. He is also the author of the 1984 and 1989 Swiss scientific reports on methadone as well as the president of the Zurich Drug Commission, and the

author of situation reports and of the overall concept for preventive, therapeutic and repressive measures in the area of juvenile drug habits.

Uchtenhagen was the founder and long-term president of two specialized associations: the Swiss Association for Group Dynamics and Group Psychology, and the Swiss Association for Social Psychiatry, a subsidiary of the Swiss Association for Psychiatry.

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In 1991 he started intensive cooperation with three other European universities (Hamburg, Amsterdam and London) for the preparation of annual European meetings on addiction research. In 1992 he became head of the COST project 'Evaluation of Action against Drug Abuse in Europe'. He was one of the initiators and editors of this publication in 1994. In the same year, he founded the Institute for Addiction Research in Zurich with the participation of four university institutes; currently twelve research projects are in progress. Together with Michael Krausz from Hamburg, he became editor-in-chief of European Addiction Research in 1994

The list of Uchtenhagen's publications spans some 220 works, an impressive list representing the range of his interests. To put it succinctly, if in social psychiatry Wing is associated with a commitment to a strictly empirical approach, and Strotzka with the integration of an ethical, therapeutic and professional fundamental attitude, then Uchtenhagen stands for the successful synthesis of both.

He has always shunned ivory towers. His receptiveness to change has enabled him to interpret the signs of the times correctly and to promote the founding of alternative institutions, some providing inpatient services when the economic situation has been favourable.

Two features demonstrate his involvement in the Bleuler tradition: on the one hand his personal daily contact with patients, the touchstone of all therapeutic innovations, and on the other his favouring of follow-up studies which only too frequently relativize the relevance of therapeutic interventions and provide a view of auto remissive processes.

As a cosmopolitan, he has been able to appreciate the broader dimensions of problems and keep their relevance on a national scale in correct proportions.

His personal courage has enabled him to introduce modes of treatment when he was convinced of their efficacy, despite the resistance of scientific and political circles. Thus there was considerable protest even among his own ranks when he initiated substitution treatments in view of the changes among drug patients at that time. Far from seeing the solution of the drug problem in these treatments, he declared that they were an initial step in the right direction. Thus Uchtenhagen was committed to a practice of harm reduction when no one else had thought of this approach.

Not only in the addiction sector has he frequently been ahead of his time, though he has never been considered a pioneer in comparison to other social psychiatrists. One reason is probably to be bound in his intellectual sincerity and his consistent scepticism. Treatment can improve the patient's life and even influence the course of the disease but seldom does it lead to integral restitution in psychiatric illness. Consequently he has avoided claiming any innovation as a panacea.

One-sidedness is foreign to him; premature causal declarations are never heard from him. His outlook has always been set on the feasible and on moderation. This has rendered him immune

both to en vogue ideas which hypothesize the social genesis of mental disorders and to concepts reducing psychiatry to purely biological determinants.

Ambros Uchtenhagen has created an impressive life's work to date. Although he will remain active in the newly founded Addiction Research Institute and the international association of addiction researchers, he will leave a gap in social psychiatry in its present form.

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