It is hard to believe that Theo Rufli will turn 65 on February 15, 2005, and therefore will step back and retire at the end of the winter term. Beginning over 35 years ago, he had been first coworker and then – for 19 years – director of the Department of Dermatology at the University Hospital of Basel. After 2 years of internal medicine, he received his training as a dermatology resident from 1969 to 1973 as a scholar of Prof. Rudolf Schuppli. He spent some time abroad in dermatology departments at Warsaw and in several institutions in London. After returning, he became ‘Oberarzt’ in 1973 and received the ‘venia docendi’ in 1977. He then served many years as vice-chairman until he was elected Ordinary Professor for Dermatology and Venereology in 1985. This was in a long-standing tradition as his predecessors Wilhelm Lutz (1922–1956) and Rudolf Schuppli (1956–1985) had also been first members of the clinic staff and had then both been elected as ordinary professor and director. All three chairmen were excellent clinicians, histopathologists and allrounders just as it is required in a clinic with few permanent staff members.

His first and central interest has always been the patient, his disease but also the care for the person behind, because he had a deep compassionate understanding for the suffering patient. As a director of the clinic, he always had an open heart and office door for the problems of every coworker. Perhaps more than anyone else, Theo Rufli directly supervised the training of residents and always guarded the quality of graduate students and the respect that dermatology gained from other physicians. He is an outstanding teacher; countless medical students have followed his famous lectures spiced with humor and anecdotes. Because of his obvious love for his own specialty and his ability to communicate this commitment to his students, many of them entered the field of dermatology, and residents held him in high regard. He taught clinical dermatology as an essential part of modern medicine and always reminded students and residents of the value of looking, examining and talking to patients. Although
Theo Rufli was convinced that the progress in dermatology lies in basic research, he also recognized the importance of clinical dermatology guiding the areas of investigation. His clinical presentations at the annual meetings of the Swiss Society of Dermatology and Venereology are outstanding examples of how to blend academic knowledge with the practice of dermatology.

Under his supervision, numerous dermatologists have been formed, who later opened their private practices in many parts of Switzerland or went into academic careers. He has always supported women and, therefore, up to half of the residents were female. Under his chair, four coworkers received the ‘venia docendi’. Many other tasks have been taken over and fulfilled by him. He served as dean of the medical faculty, president of the Swiss Society of Dermatology and Venereology, organized for many years the continuing medical education in the local medical society and represented dermatology in numerous commissions. He successfully managed difficult tasks, e.g. as medical coordinator of the hospital and head of the Department of Specialty Clinics in times of reorganization, decreasing financial sources, profound changes in the health system and the changing demands of patients and coworkers.

In his early years, he already proclaimed his scientific passions, which would become a life-long interest: his thesis (1969) dealt with the importance of mites in allergic asthma, and in 1977 his habilitation on gonorrhea followed. In the late seventies, a fruitful collaboration started with Kostas Y. Mumcuoglu which resulted in a reference textbook on parasitic disorders of the skin. In this special issue of Dermatology dedicated to Theo Rufli, former and current coworkers and friends have contributed to one of the many topics which were important during his academic career and which are related to his scientific interest and clinical excellence. This is reflected by articles on pruritus, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV-associated dermatoses, disorders of the genitalia, parasitic diseases, influence of vehicles on topical treatment and, last but not least, on teledermatology representing the extension of his didactic talents into new ways of communication, where he was one of the early pioneers, e.g. in establishing the successful concept of dermaNT.

The retirement of the head of a department is always a time of transition and change. After nearly 20 years of service to patients, students, fellow doctors, staff, societies and institutions, the well-deserved retirement of Theo Rufli will leave a gap, which has to be filled with younger persons and new ideas to be prepared for the many challenges of the modern health system. However, he leaves a well-organized clinic and crew behind, where the importance of the ‘human factor’ is not only a catchword but is part of its culture. He, who has always had a profound interest in and knowledge of the history of medicine and particularly of the University Hospital Basel and its Dermatology Clinic, will now become an important part of this history himself.

We are convinced that Theo Rufli will go on hunting insects with the camera in his favorite Centovalli and at the shores of the Lake of Constance and that he will continue to care for his many other hobbies and, last but not least, for his family who had often to step back in the past. We would like to thank him for the many years of compassionate enthusiasm and willingness to help patients, support young colleagues in their formation and careers, and lead the department through the ups and downs of changing times. We wish him a happy and quieter life in the years to come.