The open letter duo of the ‚Pandemic Review Initiative'

Open, critical and constructive ‚debriefing'

Over 600 researchers from various disciplines, including 40 from the field of health research, have co-signed a two-part open letter (1, 2) written by the recently founded ‚Pandemic Reappraisal Initiative' (3). This initiative is the brainchild of astrophysicist Prof Dr Bernhard Müller from Monash University (Australia), who is associated with the group of authors led by Prof Dr Matthias Schrappe (University of Cologne), which has critically examined corona management in Germany since the outbreak of the corona pandemic with eight thesis papers and four ad hoc statements (4) as well as a multi-professional commentary series (5) - all published in ‚Monitor Versorgungsforschung'. In addition, Müller published a widely acclaimed controversial paper ‚Zur Modellierung der Coronapandemie' (6). While these scientific works were intended to show that scientific and diagnostic findings are indispensable in pandemics, but are not sufficient on their own to successfully overcome such a crisis, the Open Letters are now intended to support the call for a review of the corona pandemic and the establishment of a commission of enquiry on the one hand, and to facilitate the start of a necessary review process by means of a prioritisation and structuring catalogue on the other.

>> According to the authors and co-signatories at the beginning of the first open letter, the ‚reflection on the pandemic to date has been too selective and too much characterised by the pursuit of political and media sovereignty of opinion'. An organised and systematic review is needed in order to draw ‚robust lessons for future crises' and avoid similar mistakes.

For this reason, the author and co-signatories, a prominent group of scientists from many disciplines, agree with the political calls already made - for example by the FDP - for the establishment of a commission to review the pandemic, as is already the case in Australia, for example. An open, critical and constructive ‚debriefing' is an indispensable part of any professional crisis management. In addition to the objective learning process, the integrative effect of an open debate on civil society is also essential. This includes an objective exchange of different points of view as a central feature of a democratic culture of discussion and resolution. The authors set themselves the task of identifying topics and suitable methodological principles for the reappraisal process - on a voluntary and therefore unremunerated basis - without wanting to anticipate answers to contentious issues. However, they demand that a commission (should it ever be set up) must firstly comprehensively analyse the immediate effects of the pandemic and collateral damage and secondly develop strategies for overcoming and preventing them in the future. In the light of the pandemic experience, the commission should in particular examine

- the healthcare system with a view to the entire care pyramid - from GP care to cutting-edge medicine, including outpatient and inpatient care as well as the public healthcare system;
- the education system from nursery to university, also taking into account social and psychological factors for successful education and development ;
- social tensions and psychological strain on people in our country and the exacerbation of social inequalities ;
- the economic impact of the pandemic (measures) ;
- collateral damage to cultural and social life .

According to the authors, the commission should also critically review the management of the pandemic. On the one hand, it is important to avoid mistakes, but on the other hand, it is also important to identify knowledge and alternative courses of action that were overlooked ex ante, to integrate the learning progress of the last three years and to draw comparisons with other countries. Examples of good crisis management at national and international level should also be identified and discussed in particular:

- Transparency, evidence-based and efficiency of decision-making and error correction processes ;
- the interaction between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government as well as academia and the media ;
- the quality of scientific policy advice (breadth of expertise, mechanisms for selecting consultants, professional reliability, conflicts of interest, etc.) ;
- Organisation and balance of scientific research, from careful data collection and modelling, clinical studies and non-medical accompanying research to vaccination management and pharmacovigilance ;
- Communication between government authorities, scientific institutions and the media, also with regard to a systematic categorisation of the robustness of scientific evidence .

In order to do this, the authors and co-signatories of the two open letters believe that a sustainable organisational and methodological working basis is required:

- The review should be as depersonalised as possible and independent of political interests from a systemic perspective .
- A broad representation of relevant national and international expertise should be sought when selecting the commission members and hearing other experts .
- Well-founded criticism of the pandemic management of the last three years must be included.
- Conflicts of interest due to advisory activities and other relevant functions should be minimised .
- A high degree of transparency and publicity of the process is required to build trust .
- The experiences of the people in our country must be incorporated into the work of the Commission in an appropriate manner, for example in line with the ‚listening exercise' of the Covid-19 Inquiry in the UK.

The authors of the Open Letters, which have been written with a great deal of passion and expertise and which all want to contribute to dealing with the consequences of the pandemic, are of course fully aware that the central question of the necessary pandemic response will be: ‚Where to start?'. This

is why the second open letter prioritises and structures the issues in question. The focus is on:

(1) questioning the basic idea of evidence,
(2) the weakening of the principle of patient-orientation and
(3) the recent preference for top-down control without the involvement of partners in the healthcare system.

In addition, the authors formulate concrete proposals for implementing the review process, which they believe could overcome the initial difficulties caused by the wide range of scientific and social issues. Firstly, not all topics could be dealt with at the same time, if only because of the threat of overstretching the available resources. Secondly, in view of the complexity of partially overlapping aspects, there is a risk that crucial topics will be overlooked. It is therefore essential to identify a few priority initial topics and to structure other topics in a meaningful way at a later date. For this reason, the Pandemic Review Initiative has been working intensively on possible prioritisation criteria. As a review of the pandemic can only succeed with the involvement of as many stakeholders/interest groups in the healthcare system as possible, it makes sense to prioritise topics that were of great importance in the pre-pandemic era on the one hand and that experienced significant ‚course changes' or disruptions during the pandemic on the other.

Based on these considerations, three extremely pressing topics emerged that had gained broad acceptance in the healthcare system and beyond before the pandemic - after a long, sometimes decades-long professional, scientific and social debate:

- the central role of scientific evidence in the justification and communication of individual and societal decisions
- the major role of patient autonomy as the cornerstone of action, which was able to compensate for the disadvantages of paternalistic (patronising) structures and attitudes
- the further development of corporatist structures in the healthcare system in the sense of a moderated governance concept that involves stakeholders (groups, associations, etc.) at all levels, subject to legal framework requirements

Other important topics that will be discussed later, but which would also show a high degree of discontinuity between the pre-pandemic and pandemic phases, are, for example, in the opinion of the group:

- Principles of risk management (particularly from a crisis management perspective) ,
- principles of risk communication (dealing with information and, above all, safeguarding information, dealing with fear and panic, etc.) ,
- the standard of proportionality as the basis for normative decisions in crisis management ,
- the role of the media, particularly with regard to the communication of facts and views, and
- the role of science itself in its constituent independence, especially from the perspective of necessary policy advice .

Incidentally, Prof. Schrappe presented important observations and analyses on the latter point in a lecture (7) and also in an article in the magazine ‚Cicero' (8) on the ‚scientism paradox' as part of a kick-off event in July 2023 and provided impetus for further discussion. In his view, the paradox he addresses is that the (important) reference to science that has been introduced into the media and politics during the pandemic is being counteracted by an increasing belief in science. Or even worse: according to Schrappe, what may superficially appear to be a strengthening of both politics and science is actually leading to sub-optimisation on both sides. This in turn means that not only can politics not benefit from greater scientific rigour and evidence-based research, but it also damages its own legitimacy through poor results. According to Schrappe, science loses its independence, narrows the discourse and also reduces its productivity.

The lecture series initiated by Schrappe and Müller on the topic of ‚scientism' (9) - a technical term that describes the interactions between the scientific and political systems - makes clear the different ways of seeing and acting: while politics has value judgements and the distribution of power on its agenda, science tries to convince through discourse and innovation. A certain criticism of the expertocracy present in the media, which influences politics and society in all crises, certainly resonates here. Schrappe writes in the magazine ‚Cicero' (8): ‚Scientists as talk show heroes, politics implements their truths, because the house is on fire: corona, climate, heat, war. But when science and politics mix, they reinforce scientific scepticism and weaken political legitimacy.' <<

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