Memorial symposium for Dr Friedrich Wilhelm Schwartz (1943–2024)

# Ursula von der Leyen: "Four central pillars"

At the end of November, a truly memorable event took place in Lecture Hall F of the J1 Clinical Teaching Building at Hannover Medical School (MHH): None other than EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, herself a student at MHH in the 1980s, honoured the memorial symposium for "her" professor – Dr Friedrich Wilhelm Schwartz (1943–2024) – with her presence in the very week that negotiations on the future of Ukraine were taking place in Geneva. After a welcome by MHH President Prof. Dr. Denise Hilfiker-Kleiner, she gave the opening speech for the symposium "Public Health – Research, Teaching, Shaping the Future – From Idea to Creative Power in Healthcare" in honour of Schwartz, one of the pioneers of public health in Germany and director of the Institute for Epidemiology, Social Medicine and Health System Research at MHH from 1985 to 2009. Following various presentations – including those by Prof. Dr. Andreas Seidler, Prof. Stefan Willich and Prof. Dr. Ulla Walter – former graduates and current students discussed with the two moderators, Prof. Dr. Marlies Dierks and Prof. Dr. Volker Amelung, under the heading "PH: what remains? – where are we headed?"

>> As guest of honour and former student of Professor Schwartz, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gave the opening speech, in which she presented both personal insights and a visionary agenda for global health policy. In her address, von der Leyen described Professor Schwartz as a visionary who was always willing to take unconventional paths: "He was someone who dared to think things that no one had thought before. He forged his own path through the dense undergrowth. He embodied this as a professor, as a teacher, as a mentor."

She also recalled her own time as a public health student and research assistant in the late 1990s, when she was faced with the challenge of balancing a mandatory internship with her impending childbirth. Just as she was about to postpone the internship for a year, Schwartz offered her a solution that was revolutionary for the time: a computer-assisted, web-based remote internship. This pragmatic and forward-looking approach enabled her to complete her studies without delay while her daughter was born. For Schwartz, von der Leyen said, every single life mattered, as did the conviction that all people deserve equal opportunities for a healthy life.

Based on Professor Schwartz's legacy, von der Leyen outlined four central pillars on which a resilient health policy must rest today:



**EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke at the memorial symposium for "her" professor, Dr Friedrich Wilhelm Schwartz**

*Link to speech/video: https://t1p.de/2b7bt*

**1. Global responsibility:** The Covid-19 pandemic has made it clear that national solo efforts are not enough in a connected world. Von der Leyen emphasised that Europe had demonstrated solidarity by overcoming fragmentation and exporting vaccines. With the "Global Gateway" initiative, the EU is investing heavily in capacity building in Africa, Asia and Latin America to promote independent production of vaccines and medicines there and reduce dependencies.

**2. Foresight:** Forward-looking policies must identify crises before they escalate. This applies in particular to the health consequences of climate change, such as the spread of tropical diseases in Europe. By establishing the EU agency HERA and setting up the European Health Union, Europe has taken measures to secure supply chains and be able to respond to new pathogens within 100 days.

**3. Innovative strength:** The technological revolution, particularly through artificial intelligence (AI), offers enormous opportunities for the early detection of cancer and cardiovascular diseases, as well as the faster development of new medicines. However, von der Leyen also emphasised that innovation must always serve people and that the protection of patient data must remain a top priority.

**4. Trust:** At a time when disinformation and targeted manipulation are undermining trust in science, it is essential to communicate fact-based information. As an example, she cited successful campaigns against HPV vaccination myths in Ireland, which showed that concerted education can turn the tide. Concluding her speech, the President of the European Commission emphasised the importance of academic freedom, which makes Europe a global magnet for top researchers. The massive increase in the number of applicants for EU research grants is a sign of hope. If we succeed in further strengthening the pillars of responsibility, foresight, innovation and trust, she said, she is confident about the future despite the current global turmoil.