

Title:

Virchow Prize for Global Health: Some additional reflections

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The Journal of Public Health in Africa recently published the paper *A prize for global health in the name of Rudolf Virchow* by Tolu Oni and colleagues.¹ Although it does not provide any reference, the article by Oni et al. is unmistakably a reply of our paper published in the BMJ Global Health in March 2023.² In flowery words, the authors pay tribute to the legacy and merit of the name-giver of the Virchow Prize for Global Health, the great German social physician, who so vividly described the close connection between poverty and health. Moreover, they emphasise the fact that the Foundation's council, which nominates the Virchow Prize laureates, is independent from the founders of the Virchow Foundation. Finally, Oni et al. express their hope "that the Virchow Prize for Global Health will draw attention to the issue of health inequities, raising public awareness and encouraging governments, policymakers, and organisations to take action. The prize should inspire and serve as a catalyst for progress. The coupling to the name and work of Rudolf Virchow should help us realize this ambitious goal."

We wish the authors and the Virchow Committee, to which they all belong, every success in achieving this ambitious goal. And, of course, one can only agree with their noble aims, as well as with the appreciation of Rudolf Virchow's life's work and legacy. However, the crucial question remains as to whether this is just another example for the present emaciation of global health,³ or, at best, wishful thinking, the implementation of which cannot really be expected by an organisation such as the Virchow Foundation and Committee. In spite of all the declarations of intent, we do not yet see the Virchow Prize moving in the right direction and becoming an award that effectively spans across the complex field of global health. And the article by Oni et al. does not dispel our doubts.

Just a quick look at the authors of the reply is enlightening. In addition to being affiliated with the Virchow Foundation for Global Health in Berlin, all authors are associated with universities and organisations in the global North - reinforcing the often-criticised northern hegemony in global health.^{4 5} Four of the five authors are from the medical field: epidemiology, pharmacology, paediatric infectiology and neuroscience. This suggests a biomedical bias until proven otherwise, and the proof remains to be seen.

Global medicine or global health?

Despite all claims to the contrary, the composition of the authorship does not lend itself to the assumption that the Virchow Prize will actually "address the underlying cultural, social, economic, commercial and political determinants of health", let alone "health inequalities".¹ The paper by Oni et al. confirms our suspicion that the Virchow Prize is nothing more than further evidence of the biomedical reductionist trend in global health.⁶ The two prizes awarded so far reflect a disease-focused approach to global health and are more in line with a global medicine prize than a global health prize.

While pointing to the patronage and high prestige of the Virchow Prize, the paper by Oni et al. completely ignores the role of German industry in the Virchow Foundation and other relevant global health institutions. The only non-medical co-author represents the Global Health Alliance, a lobbying organisation of the Federation of German Industries BDI.⁷ It is particularly worth noting that the BDI also represents German pharmaceutical manufacturers, which fiercely defended their patent rights during the last pandemic, further hampering rapid access to COVID-19 vaccines and drugs for millions of people, particularly in low-income countries.⁸ It is remarkable to observe how they brought governments to a complete U-turn on the patent issue and to block a patent waiver,⁹ despite all much-vaunted commitment to global health.¹⁰

Public health researchers and policy-makers in Africa who applaud the Virchow Prize and the foundation behind it should not be surprised if (German) industry once again puts profit interests ahead of global health needs. Symbolic actions may turn out to be nothing more than blue-washing by governments or industries in the global North, ultimately perpetuating post-colonial hegemony and power relations.

Suspicious sources and interests

Although Oni et al. also do not at all refer to the origin of the prize money, at least for public health scholars raised and educated in Germany at least, it is hard to stomach the idea that the assets of a foundation whose money came from the distribution of nasty, consistently unhealthy reporting are now being used for global health. The Springer newspapers, especially BILD and WELT, have long been reliable neoliberal propagandisers and constant polemicists against health promotion, prevention and social justice. Notwithstanding the Latin wisdom *pecunia non olet*, scholars and politicians outside Germany should be aware of the hypocrisy behind the use of the funds of the Friede Springer Foundation for the Global Health Prize.

Their involvement is further evidence of the refeudalisation of global society that has taken on considerable proportions in recent decades, particularly in the field of global health.¹¹ Founded on the fortunes of John D. Rockefeller, Henry Wellcome and the former couple Bill and Melinda Gates, the sheer volume of their financial resources allows these foundations to shape global health policy far more than the World Health Organisation (WHO) or individual states. A handful of extremely wealthy billionaires are increasingly capturing global health; they are prioritising international health as an outgrowth of tropical health, not only reproducing conventional colonialism but promoting a new kind of aristocratic colonisation of countries and people worldwide.¹² Even if the Friede Springer Foundation and the Virchow Prize are only small lights in the philanthropic sky, they represent the growing usurpation of global health by transnational corporations and the increasingly powerful financial aristocracy. If the foundation that bears his name were to take seriously the legacy of Rudolf Virchow, who fought throughout his life for social reforms and constitutional democracy, it would have to honour and reward attempts to curb the power of the new feudal rulers and their philanthropic organisations, rather than policies and institutions that reduce global health to biomedicine, copy the approaches of the high-income countries, and offer the philanthrocapitalists new fields of intervention and manipulation.

¹ Oni T, Ganten D, Kampmann B, et al. A prize for global health in the name of Rudolf Virchow. *J Public Health Afr* 2023 (eprint). doi:10.4081/jphia.2023.2862.

² Holst J, Tinnemann P, van de Pas R. The Virchow Prize: cementing commodification, coloniality and biomedical reductionism in global health? *BMJ Glob Health*. 2023;8(5):e011240. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-011240.

³ Horton R. Offline: Resist, imagine, enact—an antidote to global vanity. *Lancet* 2022;400:1571.

⁴ Horton R. Offline: The case against global health. *Lancet* 2014;383:1705.

⁵ Kentikelenis A, Seabrooke, L, Sending, OJ. Global Health Expertise in the Shadow of Hegemony. *St Comp Int Dev* 2023; doi:10.1007/s12116-023-09405-z

⁶ Holst J. Global health – emergence, hegemonic trends and biomedical reductionism. *Globalization Health* 2020;16:42.

⁷ BDI. German Health Alliance (GHA) – The International Voice of German Health. Berlin: Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie [Federation of the German Industry], 2023. Online available at: <https://bdi.eu/artikel/news/german-health-alliance-gha-the-international-voice-of-german-health/>.

⁸ Mossoff A, Adalja A. Patents as a Driver of the Unprecedented Biomedical Response to COVID-19. *Inquiry* 2022;59: 00469580221124819.

⁹ Röttger T. Impfpatente: Wie die Pharmalobby die Bundesregierung auf Linie brachte [How the pharmaceutical lobby has brought the federal government to its knees]. Berlin: Abgeordnetenwatch. Online available at: <https://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/recherchen/lobbyismus/impfpatente-wie-die-pharmalobby-die-bundesregierung-auf-linie-brachte>.

¹⁰ Deutschland.de. Frankfurt: Fazit Communication GmbH. Online available at: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/global-health-germanys-worldwide-commitment-to-health>.

¹¹ Birn AE. Philanthrocapitalism, past and present: The Rockefeller Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and the setting(s) of the international/global health agenda. *Hypothesis* 2014;12 (1): e8.

¹² Holst J. Viral Neoliberalism: The Road to Herd Immunity Still A Rocky One. *International Journal of Social Determinants of Health and Health Services* 2023;53: 30-38.