

## Profile

### Klaus Stöhr: preparing for the next influenza pandemic



I ask WHO's switchboard operator in Geneva for Klaus Stöhr, head of WHO's global influenza programme. She forwards the call to his office. The phone rings once, then again. Stöhr has not yet answered an e-mail I sent him 2 days ago. Third ring. Stöhr is a busy man, busy trying to convince the world it needs to be better prepared for the next influenza pandemic, which he believes is overdue. Fourth ring, and then "Stöhr". I get straight through to him, not, as expected, to his secretary. I ask if he got the e-mail I sent. "I wonder which one of the 450 e-mails I have not yet had a chance to read could be yours?" he says, a wry tone of humour emanating from his serious sounding voice. Without hesitation he arranges for an interview the next day from his home, on a Saturday morning.

Stöhr believes it's not a question of "if" a global influenza pandemic hits, but of when. "This is my job, the reason I am working: to reduce the number of people who die from influenza, who suffer from it", he says, his English perfect, with only a hint of German. The average span between global influenza pandemics is 27 years, he says. The last one struck nearly 37 years ago in 1968. He warns that the next pandemic could be exacerbated by the deadly H5N1 strain of avian flu, which has caused dozens of human deaths in the past year in southeast Asia. Stöhr estimates more than a billion people could fall ill in a pandemic, with 2–7 million deaths.

Albert Osterhaus, who as chairman of the European Scientific Working Group on Influenza is in regular contact with Stöhr, says he has many strengths, but perhaps most impressive are Stöhr's diplomatic skills. "Scientists are very competitive", Osterhaus says. "Dr Stöhr has the ability to bring them together to collaborate, rather than compete." According to Osterhaus, who is based at the Institute of Virology, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands, Stöhr excelled last year during the SARS crisis, when he led WHO's scientific investigation of the disease. Stöhr was in daily contact with about a dozen laboratories worldwide, convincing them to share "crucial" information in order to identify the cause of the disease and stop it from spreading. "I am convinced his work brought the epidemic under control and stopped it from spreading", Osterhaus says. "It could have been much worse."

Stöhr, born in 1959, grew up and was educated in East Germany, the western tip of the once mighty Soviet empire. "At one time, my Russian was as good as my English is now", he said. One might think that Stöhr would tell of hardship endured under the East German communist regime. Instead, he says: "I had a good education—free of charge. I was not blocked or impeded by politics. I had contact with students in the west and access to international scientific literature." He earned his veterinary degree in 1985 and his PhD in

epidemiology and infectious disease control in 1987, both from the University of Leipzig. Stöhr then joined East Germany's National Institute for Epidemiology and Infectious Disease Control, rising quickly to head the Infectious Diseases Department. Referring to this early professional success, he comments that "I was always the youngest".

His team in East Germany was instrumental in developing a rabies vaccine for wild foxes marketed under the trade name Rabifox. In 1989, "a week after the (Berlin) wall fell" he says, "western German scientists came to visit our lab to see what we were doing. And 3 or 4 weeks after that, the Americans came", headed by Charles Rupprecht, now head of the rabies section of the US Centers for Disease Control.

2 years later, at the end of 1991, Stöhr moved to Geneva to work as a scientist in WHO's Veterinary Public Health Unit. He had a 2-year contract. The move was risky, so much so that his wife, a virologist, stayed behind in eastern Germany with their two young sons. "I did not know at the time if it was a wise decision to make", he says. "It was a jump into cold water and I did not know what was underneath." 6 months later, his wife and sons joined him in metropolitan Geneva. In 2001, he was named head of WHO's global influenza programme. "I consider myself a lucky person", Stöhr says.

Stöhr's warnings of a worldwide influenza pandemic have featured widely in newspapers, magazines, wire services, and on the internet. "Talking to reporters is nothing that I enjoy particularly", he says. "It takes a lot of time. But it is part of my job. It's a chance to provide facts and information", he pauses, "and, certainly, to influence things". Despite having to talk to journalists, he nonetheless says he has a job that less lucky people could "only dream about". "The job gives you a lot of challenge, but a lot of satisfaction", he says. "I think there is no satisfaction in life without challenge."

Osterhaus describes Stöhr as a "good guy to have a drink with", but concedes that he often ends up "talking shop" while sitting at the bar. "Yes, definitely he is ambitious", Osterhaus says. "But in the positive sense. He wants to get the job done. He wants to achieve the goals that he sets for himself."

In recent months, Stöhr has mounted a public relations campaign to prod the world's governments, health organisations, and pharmaceutical companies to become more active in preparing for an influenza pandemic. Stöhr, attacked by some as being too alarmist and others as too conservative, defends his pronouncements: "What I say is based on fact, based on numbers, based on science. We are not promoting an emotional agenda."

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