

Media Release, July 6<sup>th</sup> 2022

## UniBE Foundation establishes endowed professorship in tissue histology

**An endowed professorship in tissue histology has been established at the University of Bern thanks to the support of Dr. h.c. Thomas Straumann, entrepreneur and founder of the Straumann Group. The professorship will be named after the renowned anatomist and bone specialist Robert K. Schenk and based at the Robert K. Schenk Laboratory of Oral Histology at the School of Dental Medicine, University of Bern. The professorship, endowed with CHF 10 million, is the first donation that the newly established UniBE Foundation is entitled to receive.**

Tissue histology is of central importance in the research and use of implants, for example in orthopedic surgery or dental implantology, as well as in tissue regeneration. For regeneration, i.e. the restoration of tissue, very often biomaterials such as granular bone substitutes are used. These must be thoroughly tested in a laboratory, examined for how tissue reacts to them, and guaranteed to be effective and inoffensive before they can be used in humans. In addition, histological analysis during preclinical studies usually improves therapies. Accordingly, the new endowed professorship for tissue histology is expected to significantly expand the understanding of tissue regeneration and contribute to improving patient therapy.

### **Honoring Robert K. Schenk for his outstanding contributions**

The endowed professorship is named after Robert K. Schenk, a renowned expert in bone biology and bone healing. Robert K. Schenk became world famous in the 1960s for his studies on osteosynthesis, the surgical joining of bones with plates or screws which allows the fractured pieces to grow back together. He was friends with Fritz Straumann, the son of the founder of the then Straumann Holding AG in Waldenburg, Prof. Dr. h.c. Reinhard Straumann, whose company manufactured materials and implants under the name Synthes for osteosynthesis implants and distributed them worldwide. In 1971, Robert K. Schenk moved from Basel to Bern to the Institute of Anatomy, where he conducted research on joint prosthetics together with Maurice E. Müller. After retirement, Schenk began a third collaboration in which he worked closely with Daniel Buser at the Dental Clinic of the University of Bern. Together, they conducted successful tests on a special titanium surface for dental implants, which was then made commercially available by today's Straumann Group and successfully marketed worldwide.

For his work, Robert K. Schenk has already been honored by the University of Bern with a laboratory in his name, the Robert K. Schenk Laboratory of Oral Histology located at sitem-insel, the Swiss Institute for Translational and Entrepreneurial Medicine. Now, with the support of Thomas

Straumann, the Robert K. Schenk Professorship for Tissue Histology is being established and will be attached to the Laboratory. It will be financed over a term of 20 years with a total of 10 million Swiss francs.

"The new endowed professorship provides meaningful support of dental, maxillofacial and orthopedic research for the University of Bern as well as for Bern as a medical center," says Christian Leumann, Rector of the University of Bern. "In addition, this will ensure that top-notch teaching and the promotion of young scientists in the field of tissue histology can continue for the next 20 years."

For donor Thomas Straumann, the support of the endowed professorship is especially personal. "I am deeply grateful to Robert K. Schenk for his achievements and his friendship with me and my father, and I would like to give something back to him, to the University of Bern, and to society." He and his father, Fritz Straumann, had close ties with Robert K. Schenk. "That is why it was my and Daniel Buser's wish that the endowed professorship be named after him."

Over 40 years of collaboration between Robert K. Schenk and the Straumann company in various areas of research resulted in numerous innovations, including bone healing for dental implants. "We owe a great deal of knowledge to Robert K. Schenk related to the processes of bone healing, development, and repair," says Anton Sculean, Clinic Director of the Department of Periodontology at the University of Bern Dental Clinic. Accordingly, the Robert K. Schenk Professorship of Tissue Histology will link diverse research groups beyond microscopic oral tissue anatomy, in fields such as orthopedics.

### **The UniBE Foundation's first endowed professorship**

The donation will be handed over to the newly established UniBE Foundation, which will thus be able to establish an endowed professorship at the University of Bern for the first time. The UniBE Foundation is a non-profit foundation of the University of Bern. Working together with private individuals, companies, and foundations, it bolsters the University of Bern's strategic initiatives and provides targeted support for groundbreaking research in the economy of the future, sustainable habitats, and an ethical standard of living. For Heinz Karrer, President of the UniBE Foundation, this first endowed professorship is a special success story: "We are very pleased that the life's work of Robert K. Schenk can be honored with this endowed professorship - it is also an excellent example of the translational research in dentistry and orthopedics which has existed for decades at the University of Bern".

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### **UniBE Foundation**

The UniBE Foundation encourages and supports the University of Bern so that a new generation of researchers can develop pioneering and globally acclaimed solutions for the economy of the future, sustainable habitats, and an ethical standard of living. The Foundation orients its funding according to the University's strategy, placing particular emphasis on excellence, innovation, and potential for the future. The foundation was established in 2021 and is chaired by Heinz Karrer, a renowned Swiss businessperson. On February 1, 2022, the UniBE Foundation started its operations under the leadership of Claudia Lehnerr Mosimann.

### **Robert K. Schenk**

Robert K. Schenk was born in the Netherlands in 1923 as the son of an emigrant family. At the age of three, he returned with his family to Switzerland, where he spent his youth in Zurich. He began studying medicine there, graduating in 1947. The first part of his career started at the University of Zurich, where he began anatomical experiments and received his Ph.D. in anatomy with Prof. Töndury. In 1956, the second part of his professional career began when he moved to the University of Basel. There he became associate professor and in the early 1960s conducted preclinical studies on the healing of fractures after osteosynthesis. These studies made him world famous in the field of orthopedic surgery. Meanwhile, his friendship with Fritz Straumann also began at this time. In 1971, Prof. Ewald Weibel brought him to the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Bern as a full professor, where, in the third part of his career, he was in charge of the musculoskeletal department and ran a microscopic tissue anatomy laboratory. Working with Maurice E. Müller, he started to do research in the field of joint prosthetics. In 1987, he began working closely with Prof. Daniel Buser to study new microrough titanium surfaces. The most successful surface in the study, the so-called SLA surface, became a worldwide success for Straumann. Robert K. Schenk became professor emeritus in 1988, but continued to do research and publish, moving his laboratory to the Institute of Pathophysiology with his friend, Prof. Herbert Fleisch. Since 1991 he was involved in the development of the GBR technique with membranes, today's best-known augmentation technique for bone defects. In 1996, he moved with his laboratory to the Dental Clinic of the University of Bern, which had been remodeled and expanded at that time, and worked there for another eight years on translational research projects before he definitively retired in 2004 at the age of 81 and handed over the laboratory to Prof. Dieter Bosshardt. In 2009, the laboratory was extensively renovated and named after Robert K. Schenk due to his great services to the Dental Clinic. In 2011, Robert K. Schenk died at the age of 88 in Wohlen near Bern.