

Swiss Public Health Conference 2021

«COVID-19 and the public health management of pandemics»

& 50 years of prevention / Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine (ISPM)

26 August 2021

Speech of rector Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann

*The spoken word applies*

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the University of Bern. It is a great honor for me to host this year's Swiss Public Health conference with the topic – *COVID-19 and the public health management of pandemics* – in concomitance with the 50 year's celebration of the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine at the University of Bern.

We have all been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and this crisis has shown the importance of science and knowledge. The University of Bern was strongly committed from the beginning to being part of the solution. For example, researchers at the Institute of Virology and Immunology of the Vetsuisse Faculty of Bern were the first to reconstruct the SARS-CoV-2 virus and, together with international partners, to develop a rapid antibody test against SARS-CoV-2. In addition, no less than 6 professors from the University of Bern, amongst those the first president, have been appointed to the Covid-19 Task Force, the national network of experts that provides scientific advice to the Federal Council and the national and cantonal authorities.

Thus the subject of public health is more important than ever. The pandemic showed us the impact on all of us, our economy, our work place environment and our social life. Public health has a long tradition in the US and the UK, and began in Switzerland only in the 1950s and early 1960s, by a number of scientists on their own initiative, until the introduction of MPH training courses in the early 1990s.

A pioneer in the field was Meinrad Schär, considered to be one of the first social and preventive medicine scientists in Switzerland who later became vice-director of the Swiss Federal Health Office (today's Federal Office of Public Health). Together with the head of the Department of Home Affairs, at that Time Federal Councillor Tschudi, he introduced social and preventive medicine as a new examination subject for the medical state examination. Zurich, Lausanne and Geneva set up new institutes and in 1971, on the basis of a resolution passed by the cantonal government, the Bern Institute was established.

Theodor Abelin took office as the first head of the institute following a successful career at the Harvard School of Public Health, still today one of our key international partners. In 2002 Matthias Egger followed as full professor of epidemiology and public health and the new director of ISPM. He was followed as director in 2018 by Oscar Franco who launched the new strategy for ISPM, in which the great challenges that humankind and public health face in 2021 are being addressed.

For the University of Bern with its eight faculties, health & medicine is one of our five strategic development areas. Together with the Inselspital, governmental support and public private partners we are aiming to promote Bern as the primary place for medicine in Switzerland. The University of Bern is investing in the future of medicine and is creating attractive positions in teaching and research for example with the recent opening of The Center for Artificial Intelligence in Medicine (CAIM) or as being partner of sitem-insel, the Swiss Institute for Translational and Entrepreneurial Medicine.

We are very proud of the achievements of the ISPM and it's 50 years anniversary. As Oscar Franco says "the working field of the ISPM is not in a lab but outside on the street". Their research concerns everyone, everywhere, following the idea of preventing diseases. With colleagues from over 23 nations across the world they aim at global excellence with local impact, one recent example is the Zika Open access project, where machine learning is being used to filter through over 7'000 publications. Another example would be the Swiss Childhood Cancer registry, where the possibility of the prevention of late effects of cancer therapy are being examined.

Let me congratulate Oscar Franco and his colleagues at ISMP to 50 years of excellence in research – we will need ISPM in the times to come!