At last, a prestigious prize for global health

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Every year when the Nobel prize in physiology or medicine is awarded for outstanding discoveries, the public health community has asked, “Why do we not have a prize with similar prestige to draw attention to the crucial relevance of public health action, at all levels of governance?”

This question motivated a group of dedicated people in Germany to establish a charitable foundation, the Virchow Foundation for Global Health,1 to create such a prize, building on the German government’s strong commitment to global health.2 The German president’s high patronage of the prize speaks to this commitment.

There is wide consensus in global health—reinforced by the covid-19 pandemic—that the relation between medical, political, economic, and social determinants must be tackled directly and jointly to make sustainable and universal improvements to health.3

Such an approach was introduced by the founders of social medicine in the 19th century4 and is immortalised in the words of Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), a German physician, biologist, anthropologist, politician, and writer, who said that “medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing but medicine on a grand scale.”5 He lived and worked in Berlin at the famous Charité Hospital in the 1840s, left in 1848 for political reasons, and returned in 1856 to work there for the next 20 years.6

Important though the results of Virchow’s work on the typhus outbreak of 1847-48 in Upper Silesia were in demonstrating the impact of social determinants of health,7 his legacy lies not in one single discovery but in a lifetime of dedication. The Virchow prize for global health, awarded in 2022 for the first time, will therefore recognise and reward the lifetime achievements of prominent individuals and organisations around the world who have had an impact on the global health challenges we face.

Sustainable development goals

The prize is envisioned to support the United Nations’ efforts to preserve the health of people and the planet through the UN’s sustainable development goals for 2030.8 Anyone with a desire to improve the health of the world’s population, whether through academic, political, social, economic, or industrial innovation, can now aspire to this prestigious award. The selection of the laureate or laureates is by majority vote of the independent Virchow Prize Committee, whose members are elected by the Virchow Foundation for Global Health Council.9

Winners will receive a monetary prize of €500 000 (£437 000; $485 000) to uphold the founder’s vision. The award’s organisers anticipate that winners will use the prize money to fund or support specific humanitarian, charitable, non-profit, academic, or research activities in global health, in line with the sustainable development goals.

The first Virchow prize for global health will be awarded on 15 October 2022, at a ceremony held in Berlin ahead of the World Health Summit.10 Its first recipient is John Nkengasong, who is being recognised for his exemplary, pioneering work in global health and his lifelong dedication to achieving health for all.11

With over 30 years’ experience in global health, Nkengasong has spent the past five years building the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) as its founding director. While he has an impressive career spanning the World Health Organization and various US government agencies, his work at Africa CDC in particularly inspiring. When the 2014 Ebola outbreak in west Africa underlined the dire need for better coordination of a regional public health response, the African Union established Africa CDC as a technical institution to support the continent’s response to disease and public health threats. At its inception in early 2017, Nkengasong led the new organisation with a handful of staff, a small number of partners, and a nascent mandate.

In five years he transformed the organisation and its capabilities, introducing what he called “a new public health order.”12 Under his leadership, Africa CDC worked with national public health institutes to strengthen the region’s role in taking more responsibility for the health of the continent’s people. At a time when global health required and continues to require strong leadership from the global south, Nkengasong’s leadership and example are of critical importance. On his shoulders, many other global health leaders across Africa and worldwide can now take inspiration and find their rightful place.

By awarding the Virchow prize to Nkengasong, the Virchow Foundation has shown the path to inclusive global health that is also systemic and interdisciplinary. The prize should incentivise and spur leadership in global health from all parts of the world and should highlight, increase, and anchor awareness and understanding of the crucial importance of global health in wider society, in politics, and with the public.

It should also provide recognition for a field whose pioneers have frequently not had the recognition they deserved because societies had not yet recognised the critical importance of global and public health. By honouring the heroes of the past such as Rudolf Virchow, we lay the path to honouring global health leadership in the present.

Competing interests: IK and CI served on the selection committee for the Virchow prize. CI’s previous role as director general of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control involved close collaboration and working with John Nkengasong for five years.
Provenance and peer review: commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

1 Virchow Prize for Global Health. https://virchowprize.org/
5 Mackenbach JP. Politics is nothing but medicine at a larger scale: reflections on public health’s biggest idea. J Epidemiol Community Health 2009;63:4–6. doi: 10.1136/jech.2008.07032. pmid: 19052033