

Honorary Professorship
Speech by Professor Dr. med. Isabella Heuser-Collier

Hanoi Medical University
22 October 2019

Honorable President of Hanoi Medical University, Prof. Thang Van Ta,

Esteemed Director of the Psychiatry Department at HMU, Prof. Van Tuan Nguyen,

Dear Mr. Hase-Bergen, Head of the Regional Office Hanoi of the German Academic Exchange Service,

Dear Dr. Schneider, Director of the Hospital-Partnership Program of the German Corporation for International Cooperation,

Dear friends and family, ladies and gentlemen,

Today we celebrate the formal establishment of a major academic partnership between Hanoi Medical University and the Charité Medical University of Berlin, Germany. The Dean of Charité, Prof Axel Pries, has bid me to bring his greetings to you and to convey his heartfelt wishes for a long, successful, and fruitful partnership

between our respective medical universities. Directly following my remarks, Mr. Hase-Bergen, the Head of the Regional Office Hanoi of the German Academic Exchange Service, will go into greater detail regarding our future collaboration.

Let me begin my own remarks to express how grateful and deeply moved I am by the honor that you bestow on me today. It is my profound hope that I will live up to the trust you have put in me. I am committed to our common project to dramatically expand the medical research cooperation between our two countries.

Just over the past few days, we visited two of your major psychiatric hospitals where we had the personal and professional pleasure of meeting Drs. Ngo Hung Lam and Bui Hong Tam and their staffs who provided us briefings and tours of their respective hospitals. In return Dr. Thi Minh Tam Ta and Dr. Eric Hahn, two of the attending psychiatrists from my Department at Charité who have been instrumental in establishing our collaborative efforts with Vietnam, each led a workshop – pharmacogenetics (Ta) and pharmacology of antipsychotics (Hahn). It was amazing how engaged and interested the participants were. The discussions were lively. And incidentally, the food served at lunch was worthy of a banquet for the gods!

As has been said earlier, the major goals of the collaboration between Hanoi Medical University and Charité in general and

between our Departments of Psychiatry in particular, is to introduce and ultimately expand new joint exchange, teaching and research programs as well as to consolidate existing collaboration about ethnic and cultural differences in the understanding and treatment of the major psychiatric disorders. But it is not only the differences in health outcomes and delivery systems that we are trying to understand. It is also our intention to achieve a better understanding of all that we share with respect to human suffering, in particular that suffering from some of the most prevalent and costly disorders in the world such as depression, schizophrenia, dementia and also epilepsy.

One obstacle mental health professionals confront, regardless of country or continent, is the stigma of mental illness! There are probably no other illnesses – arguably with the exception of HIV infection and STDs – that are more stigmatized than these psychiatric disorders. Such stigma invariably leads to under-diagnosis and under-treatment. One could say that stigma adds a social insult to the injury of mental illness.

Such needless stigma must be eliminated. One way to do this is to collaborate at a multinational level and to launch campaigns to educate the public – and frankly many a health policymaker. This in turn requires that we, the mental health professionals, (1) apply for funding from international or transnational agencies and institutions, (2) that we communicate in a common language, and

(3) that we increase the visibility and thus impact of our research work. As clinician scientists and clinical researchers we need to invest in our young staff and we must assist them in achieving international recognition so that they can participate and ultimately have an impact within the leading international research networks in their respective clinical and basic research fields. Let me be clear while I am being honored as a representative of psychiatry and the neurosciences: our collaboration in this area represents merely a beginning and that what we have begun is only the initial step of a broad and deep collaboration. Of course, other departments representing other medical disciplines of our universities will follow.

It is important here to recognize that with you, President Ta, Hanoi Medical University has demonstrated the enormous benefits from international collaboration for patients. Your work in Prof Tasuku Hanjo's lab in Japan, a Nobel Prize winner, has been successfully applied for the great benefit of Vietnamese cancer patients.

Also we recognize you, Prof. Nguyen, as one who has been so encouraging to your students and residents to spend research time at Charité and to consolidate scientific collaboration with Germany; here I also want to mention and express my deepest thanks to the German Academic Exchange Service and Mr. Hase-

Bergen who has funded Vietnamese psychiatrists to work in Berlin at my Department.

Decades ago, I myself participated in a program at the National Institute of Mental Health in Washington DC in the United States. I spent three years learning the ropes of clinical – at that time very cutting edge – molecular biology research. By this I mean I learned the craft (indeed the art) of publishing in English language journals as well as the tricks and pitfalls in the application for grants and funding. I received the encouragement of my scientific mentors to pose questions in international conferences and to pursue my scientific goals. When I became the first woman in Germany – actually in Europe – to chair an academic department of psychiatry (that was in 2001 in Berlin at the Charité), I aimed at achieving three objectives: 1. to train my staff in doing relevant and significant clinical research while at the same time providing the best care available to our patients, 2. to increase the staff's international visibility by having them communicate effortlessly and comfortably in English and 3. to provide support to promising women to compensate for the existing structural obstacles to their research career advancement.

Dr. Tam Ta who joined my department as a young Vietnamese researcher some years back and who has excelled at Charité is a

prime example of success in meeting these three objectives just outlined. I pledge here that these same three objectives will guide my work in the Charité collaboration with Hanoi Medical University. I very much look forward to other departments joining in this academic partnership.

And finally let me thank you for the opportunities presented to me within this collaborative effort and not least for the great honor of being named an honorary professor of your distinguished faculty.

Isabella Heuser