

# Our Concepts and Results Are Convincing



Prof. Dr. Günther Wess, CEO, Helmholtz Zentrum München, is at the same time vice president and coordinator of the Research Field Health in the Helmholtz Association. In the interview, Günther Wess describes the successes and strategic developments as well as the major challenges the Center will face in the next few years.

## 1. Helmholtz Zentrum München achieved outstanding evaluation results in the expert review within the framework of program-oriented funding. What makes us the leading center in the field of environmental health?

*Wess: In 2008, under the motto "One 2013", we aimed to become a leading international center in the field of environmental health within five years. The steadily increasing number of high-caliber publications and the comments of many international reviewers, most recently during the POF III review,*

*demonstrate that this aim has been achieved. We received an excellent assessment in the POF III review. What impressed the reviewers besides the top achievements of individual scientists was the interaction between various disciplines under one common topic. Furthermore, we have a good balance between our focus on certain common diseases and technology platforms combined with our expertise in health research and environmental research. With a total of 12 ERC grants, we are the most successful center in the Helmholtz Association.*

## 2. As a vice president, you are responsible for the Research Field Health within the Helmholtz Association. How well is our center anchored thematically in the Helmholtz Association?

*Wess: The Center's profile correlates well with the mission of the Helmholtz Association. Our research activities range from basic research to translational research. Our research topics address the major challenges of the future.*

## 3. Health research at Helmholtz Zentrum München shall ultimately benefit patients. How can we strengthen our translational approach in order to translate research results into medical applications?

*Wess: To limit translational research only to translational medicine would be too short-sighted. Of course, as a scientific-technical center we are interested in good collaborations and joint projects with university hospitals because we do not want to have own wards with beds. However, we are keen that our research results benefit patients, as our three translational centers show. But translation involves much more: It includes early-stage drug discovery projects, the search for new biomarkers or even technical equipment for imaging. Another aspect relates to spin-offs. Here, with 18 spin-offs that have generated several hundred jobs, we are the most successful center in the Helmholtz Association. And finally, we always forget that translation also includes knowledge transfer to society, which can hardly be expressed in the usual statistics. This includes insights into new or improved treatment regimens, as well as findings from environmental research.*

## 4. How are we expanding our endeavors to promote young scientists, now after the successful positioning of the HELENA graduate school?

*Wess: One of our great strengths is the promotion of young scientists. Our HELENA graduate school is internationally established with about 330 PhD students, and it has become a brand name among graduate schools. A post-doctoral program has just started, for which there is great demand internationally. And first pilot projects for a combined MD-PhD program are in the planning stage that shall give physicians the opportunity to conduct scientific research. A brand new project entitled Pioneer Campus is also being planned. With this program, we want to attract young international "star scientists" to Munich, where they can carry out interdisciplinary research projects under ideal conditions, also with*

*great potential for technical-medical applications. This might be a bridge between the disciplines of engineering and biology, i.e. "bioengineering".*

## 5. Successful research requires motivated researchers. What do we need to offer our scientists to tie them to the Center?

*Wess: I see major challenges in the area of mid-level scientists. Here at the Center there is a group of about 200 people, some in management positions and with fixed-term contracts. These are important staff members, without whom our center would not function. It will be crucial to develop new concepts for our personnel and also to find new forms of remuneration, which take performance and function into greater account. A solution is still not in the offing, but the topic must be addressed and receive more attention.*

## 6. What is the greatest challenge facing our center in the next few years?

*Wess: Our greatest challenge is the renovation of the infrastructure and its further development. Decades of missed opportunities are now apparent. A few years ago we began a renovation program, using funds of the Center and federal funds from the economic stimulus program, but this was just a drop in the ocean. New laboratory space was leased where we could launch our new activities, and the new diabetes building supported by Bavaria's Minister President Seehofer helps a lot. But that is not enough to remain internationally competitive. Additional resources are urgently needed.*

## 7. The Center hosts international conferences and events more and more often. What is the objective?

*Wess: We follow the recommendations of our Scientific Advisory Board to increase our international visibility through high-level symposia and conferences. Thus, in 2013, the first Helmholtz-Nature Medicine Diabetes Conference took place with the Helmholtz Diabetes Lecture by Ronald C. Kahn and the presentation of the Helmholtz Young Investigators Diabetes Award. Similarly, the already well-established "Oktoberfest Symposium" and the international Munich Lung Conference were held. This year the Center is participating in the Conference of the European Respiratory Society with more than 20 000 attendees, which will also take place in Munich. Unfortunately, we could not in the past and cannot presently host these important events on the Neuherberg campus due to lack of space and infrastructure.*

**8. Cooperation is central to successful research. How shall we develop our cooperation networks further, also against the backdrop of new forms of cooperation between university and non-university research?**

*Wess: Technische Universität and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität are our most important cooperation partners in Munich, and many joint appointments form the backbone of our common endeavors. In the framework of the German Centres for Health Research and a global orientation of the Helmholtz Association and our center, we have also undertaken joint appointments with other locations. With the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT), and the recently founded Berlin Institute of Health (BIH), interesting new models of collaboration between university and non-university research have emerged. With the BIH, the Federal Government has undertaken a strategic step using considerable resources to strengthen the research location of Berlin. At the present time, the question cannot be answered whether such models are also possible and useful in Munich.*

**9. We have focused our research on the major common diseases. What shall we focus on in the future?**

*Wess: In recent years, the Research Field Health has very successfully focused on widespread, common diseases. The founding of the German Centres for Health Research has provided additional impetus. In the framework of this strategic orientation, we are ideally positioned with our center motto "Health and Environment". It is immediately clear that lung diseases play a prominent role among the environment-related diseases. However, it is also increasingly evident that environmental factors such as diet, lack of physical activity, stress and personal lifestyle play a very important role in diseases such as diabetes. That is why research on these diseases fits perfectly in the Center profile. We were very pleased about the suggestion from the experts of the POF III review to strengthen our activities in the allergy field. We will be glad to take up this suggestion and would like to develop allergy as the third pillar of the Center alongside diabetes and lung diseases. Here the Center is in a unique position because the environmental field can make significant contributions due to its research in the topic of pollen, analysis or microbiome research in the future. And finally, we should not neglect to mention that we play an important role in the field of virus research in the German Center for Infection Research.*

Sonja Opitz, head of Corporate Communications, spoke with Prof. Dr. Günther Wess.



**BRIEF PROFILE  
DR. MARTINA HANSEN**

As head of Program Planning and Management, Dr. Martina Hansen supports the Board of Directors in the strategic development and implementation of the scientific programs. Her department is the link between management and research; it conducts the scientific controlling and provides support in the acquisition of third-party projects. Science education and training and the promotion of young scientists are also part of the department's responsibilities.



**10. As part of the POF reviews, we received recommendations. How shall we implement these?**

*Wess: The POF program was created in science with great support of Program Planning and Management. It must also be implemented in science. Only when it is accepted by the broad basis of scientists it can be successfully implemented with appropriate administrative support. To achieve this, the Board of Directors has developed a strategic plan in coordination with the topic speakers on the basis of recommendations of the Helmholtz Senate. It was discussed and endorsed by the Scientific Advisory Board. This strategic plan was*

*then adopted by the Supervisory Board. In the coming months it will be important to work out the detailed implementation in the topics on a broad basis in science, with the support of Program Planning and Management. It will be important to develop many good ideas to enhance our leading position internationally. The new governance will help us to achieve this. The Management Committee has a stronger participation of scientists than was formerly the case. Through the participation of the program speaker as well as the topic speakers and the respective scientific coordinators, we can discuss scientific issues much more intensively and then make our decisions.*