

Open Letter

With great concern we have witnessed a public media campaign defaming Professor Dr. Christoph Klein, the Director of the Department of Pediatrics at LMU Munich. In a newspaper article entitled "Physician without Borders" the Süddeutsche Zeitung portrays a picture of a physician, without empathy for his patients, whose ambition drives a gene therapy study forward without respecting ethical principles. We have known Christoph Klein and his lifelong scientific attempts to identify and develop cures for numerous devastating rare diseases. We are also keenly aware of his morality and dedication to public health. We are also aware of the scientific and practical details of the gene therapy study for patients with Wiskott Aldrich syndrome that Christoph Klein led for over a decade. Thus, we are in the position to share with the German public that this personal characterization of a "physician without borders" is distorted, factually unsubstantiated, and wrong.

In contrast to the insinuations by the media, Christoph Klein never pushed the Wiskott Aldrich syndrome clinical gene therapy study forward without deep ethical considerations. The study was conscientiously prepared spanning an eight-year period, including several years of interdisciplinary work with a team of experts in the field of bioethics. Christoph Klein was never hesitant to share the "bad news" of leukemia development with the lay public and scientific communities: there was rapid dissemination of this material through several press releases and presentations in numerous conferences. The SZ Magazine describes Christoph Klein's work adjacent to descriptions of unethical Nazi-doctors, deliberately provoking the public perception of a direct comparison of Christoph Klein with Nazi-criminals.

We are very concerned about the consequences of this targeted character assassination and, more generally, its concomitant untoward affects on the public perception of academic medicine. Using scientific reasoning firmly embedded in ethical principles, caring physicians clearly have a critical mission to enhance knowledge of underlying disease mechanisms and to develop improved therapeutic strategies. In parallel the media have an important responsibility to translate this process for the public. When the media employs inaccurate reporting, coupled with prejudiced suspicions and insinuations, the relationship between medicine and society is put at risk. At the end, the patients with still incurable diseases will be the ones to suffer most. We implore academic clinical and scientific leaders as well as the public to engage in a thorough and factual analysis of the clinical and scientific efforts alluded to in the media to prevent unwarranted injury of a lifelong public servant.

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