

Academic protest against the dismissal of Prof. Dr. Iris Ritzmann by the University of Zurich

We, the undersigned scientists, are deeply disturbed to hear of the dismissal of Professor Dr Iris Ritzmann by the University of Zurich. We find it entirely incomprehensible that the University of Zurich could dismiss such a highly esteemed and renowned scientist.

For fifteen years (up until the appointment of a new director in 2011) Iris Ritzmann maintained the scientific work and standards at the Institute of the History of Medicine in Zurich (MHIZ) almost singlehandedly and under the most adverse conditions. In doing so she gained the recognition of the scientific community as a notable scientist and medical historian, a fact that has found reflection in the many invitations she received as a lecturer, keynote speaker and author of original publications in peer-review journals and edited volumes.

The outstanding quality of Ritzmann's work became also apparent recently when the University of Zurich commissioned an expert committee to examine the dissertations supervised at the MHIZ. While the supervisory activities of the former head of the Institute and of the curator were found to be largely very poor, a number of other dissertations from the Zurich Institute were considered excellent. Nobody who knows anything about the situation at Zurich would have the slightest doubt that the latter dissertations were supervised by Iris Ritzmann. This fact was omitted by the University.

Eleven months ago, the University of Zurich suspended Iris Ritzmann pending the results of a legal investigation into the possible disclosure of the MHIZ annual report and an expert report about the collection at her Institute. In all this time the prosecutor has not released any information or evidence. The University has nevertheless maintained the suspension and massively obstructed Iris Ritzmann's scientific work. Ritzmann was, for instance, prevented from accepting invitations to lecture without the written consent of the Institute's acting director and the legal department and, as a result of clearly arbitrary decisions, she was unable to attend a number of international conferences.

Over and above that, the University has apparently given the public prosecutor of the Canton of Zurich access to the metadata of the email correspondence and telephone calls of University staff and journalists. Such steps are not only hugely out of proportion, they constitute an unacceptable violation of the personal rights of all scientists and faculty members of the University. We object to this violation in the strongest terms.

Whatever the charge brought against Iris Ritzmann in connection with press contacts and the passing on of information about the Institute of the History of Medicine to the press, it must be stated clearly that the university, which is funded by the taxpayer, is subject to the principle of freedom of information. As scientists who are constantly in the public eye and in communication with the press we all have regular "contact with the press." This contact often involves a degree of disclosure of background information to journalists; how else could a press that is worthy of the name function? We don't see it as our task to obstruct the work of the press.

The charges that led to Iris Ritzmann's dismissal in no way justify the dismissal of this professor who, for many years, has done excellent work in research and teaching and has represented her subject with great personal commitment at home and abroad. It is difficult not to suspect that the University thinks it has to bow to political pressure by sacrificing a pawn.

But the sacrifice is much greater than the University assumes: it not only dismisses a renowned professor but sacrifices science to politics.

In the year since this situation at the MHIZ began, the University has neglected to actively promote the standards of research and teaching. It was, however, the neglecting of these standards over many years that caused the conflict at the MHIZ, which escalated a year ago, in the first place. It is high time the University looked into this development and made it public. As long as the University tries to find easy ways out by blaming administration and staff members and glossing over past mistakes, it will not be possible to undo the damage it has caused to Medical History as a discipline and to the Swiss universities.

We strongly encourage the University of Zurich

- To reinstitute Professor Dr Iris Ritzmann as a scientist at the University of Zurich in a position that will allow her to fully pursue her scientific work.
- To investigate the deeply rooted problems of the MHIZ and make them public, including all relevant documents.
- To disclose whether the public prosecutor was in fact given access to the metadata of the email correspondence and telephone calls of university staff and to explain the legitimacy of such steps.

We all appreciate the University of Zurich. Many of us work here or have worked closely with the University and its associates. We therefore hope that the University of Zurich will consider our urgent recommendations as recommendations of friends.