



Press Statement

Professor Dr. Christian Kunz Appointed First Honorary Member of the ISW-TBE

“Father“ of TBE Vaccination Launched Austrian Success Story

(Vienna, 30 October 2007) – Owing to the pioneering research of Professor Dr. Christian Kunz, Professor Emeritus of the Institute of Virology of Vienna Medical University, in the 1970ies, Austria today can boast the highest TBE vaccination rate in Europe. The International Scientific Working Group on Tick-Borne Encephalitis (ISW-TBE) takes pleasure in honoring this exceptional achievement by appointing Professor Kunz, on the occasion of his 80th birthday, the first honorary member of the ISW-TBE.

As early as in the 1960ies, Kunz realized that the TBE virus posed an increasing health threat to the Austrian population, particularly among high-risk groups, such as farmers and foresters. In 1976 and thanks to the dauntless efforts of Professor Kunz, the TBE vaccine was first marketed in Austria. Five years later, the first TBE vaccination campaign was launched. “The success has been remarkable: The 700 illnesses registered annually in the pre-vaccination era have dropped to 84 cases in 2006,” said Professor Dr. Michael Kunze, Chairman of the ISW-TBE and Head of the Institute for Social Medicine at Vienna Medical University. Currently, about 88 percent of Austrians have received at least one vaccination against TBE, and 58 percent of Austrians are within the recommended vaccination schedule.

Testing the TBE Vaccine

In the 1960ies and 70ies, Austria saw a sharp increase in the number of TBE cases, and TBE came to be viewed as a serious threat to public health. “It was clear to me from the very outset,” Professor Kunz recalls, “that only a vaccine would be able to control the spread of the disease, and I thought to myself: ‘We have to have this vaccine – even if I have to develop it myself.’” In 1973, Professor Kunz and his British colleague Professor Keppie successfully developed such a vaccine. In the same year, Kunz first tested it both in himself and in one of his co-workers, Dr. Hofmann. The trial that took

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place on 24th of April 1973 was successful: Kunz and Hofmann both developed antibodies, as did the staff of the institute vaccinated subsequently. This proved that the vaccine elicited the desired immune response. “In the years that followed,” Professor Kunz went on, “I traveled across the country to vaccinate people at particularly high risk of contracting the disease. By 1976, we had vaccinated some 30,000 people!” TBE vaccination is rightly considered the only effective protection against this tick-borne viral infection, which potentially leads to inflammation of the meninges, the brain, and the central nervous system.

Austria – leading the way in terms of TBE vaccination rates

Austria is the country with the highest TBE vaccination rate in Europe. “Between 2000 and 2006, at least 2,800 TBE cases in Austria – about 20 of them lethal – were prevented by vaccination,” says Professor Franz X. Heinz, Head of the Institute of Virology of Vienna Medical University. In Austria’s neighboring countries with a similarly high risk of infection, vaccination rates are much lower, ranging from 24 percent in Germany to 17 percent in Switzerland and 16 percent in the Czech Republic. Today, accurate statistics about TBE are available, which is “mainly due to the cutting-edge work by Professor Christian Kunz. In 1977, on the occasion of a virology conference, Kunz talked about the spread of TBE in Austria, illustrating his presentation with perfectly edited endemic maps,” says Professor Michael Roggendorf, Head of the Institute of Virology of Essen Medical University.

About the ISW-TBE

Founded some 10 years ago, the International Scientific Working Group on Tick-Borne Encephalitis (ISW-TBE) is a group of more than 40 highly recognized epidemiologists, virologists, and health care professionals from 16 countries dedicated to raising awareness and providing training on the spread, combat, and clinical features of TBE. For more information, please go to www.ISW-TBE.info.

Pictures of the press breakfast:

http://prfoto.at/main.php?g=1&sid=tqzntmqpkvuossxlmwtovvnonqmswmkolsuxtvmkyqnyusztzktlsruusr&dir=200710&u=38&e=20071030_z&a=event&start=0

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