

In remembrance of the victims of Nazi medicine

Nuremberg, May 2012

Honoured delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

After thirty-three years, the German Medical Assembly (*Deutscher Ärztetag*), the annual meeting of the German Medical Association (*Bundesärztekammer*), is once again being held in Nuremberg, the site of the Doctors' Trial of 1946-1947. This serves as an appropriate and timely opportunity for the German Medical Association to take an official position on its historical responsibility and the complicity of its predecessor organization in crimes against humanity committed under the Nazi regime. The victims of the medical system under National Socialism – the few still alive today and the many who have died at the time or in the intervening years – deserve a comprehensive explanation by the German Medical Association, including an official and explicit apology. This has yet to be offered.

In light of the lectures given by the medical historian Prof. Richard Toellner on medicine under National Socialism and the “burden of the lessons learned” during the 92nd German Medical Assembly in Berlin in 1989, as well as the resolution of the 99th German Medical Assembly in Cologne in 1996 on the “values of the Medical Association 50 years after the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial,” we would like to encourage you, here in Nuremberg, where the medical crimes against humanity were publically put on trial, to use the 115th German Medical Assembly to publically and officially take a stand on this issue.

The human rights violations committed by doctors and the medical system as a whole under the Nazi regime elicit a multitude of questions for medicine today. They concern the way in which the German Medical Association perceives itself as well as possible implications for professional behaviour and medical ethics.

In contrast to still widely accepted views, the initiative for the most serious human rights violations did not originate from the political authorities at the time, but rather from physicians themselves:

- The forced sterilization of over 360,000 individuals classified with “hereditary illness,”
- the killing of well over 200,000 mentally ill and disabled people,
- involuntary and often deadly medical research conducted on thousands of experimental subjects.

In addition, there was the dismissal and expulsion of “Jewish” and “politically unreliable” physicians and the exploitation of slave labourers in medical institutions, including university clinics and confessional hospitals.

The crimes committed by Nazi medicine were not those of a few isolated and fanatical doctors, but rather took place with the substantial involvement of leading representatives of the medical association and medical specialisms as institutional bodies, as well as with the considerable participation of eminent representatives of university medicine and renowned biomedical research facilities.

Many of the doctors involved also held distinguished medical positions in the post-war period. Similarly, even after 1945, stigmatizing and debasing concepts and procedures with respect to ill and disabled people continued to be applied to an alarming extent. For decades, there was no systematic reflection given to the preconditions for such practices and ways of thinking. The documentation from the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial as well as the 1947 "Nuremberg Code" was simply forgotten. In the post-war decades, the issue of medicine under National Socialism tended to be regarded as a threat to the reputation of the medical profession.

Only since the 1980s have institutional medical associations in Germany slowly begun to confront this historical reality. Since then, research has only to a very limited extent been supported by the German Medical Association and the State Chambers of Physicians. Equally, even in the 1990s, appeals to medical associations for financial support of key historical research and publication projects were still rejected. Examples of the suppression and the glossing over of the Nazi past of medical officials continue to the present day.

The 115th German Medical Assembly in Nuremberg is a historic opportunity

The 92nd German Medical Assembly in Berlin in 1989 and the 99th German Medical Assembly in Cologne in 1996 explicitly addressed the issue of medicine under the Nazi regime and its victims. These reflections can and should lead to the desire to ask for an apology, which is especially important to those victims who are still alive. Such an official declaration on the part of the 115th German Medical Assembly in Nuremberg and the concomitant obligation to provide comprehensive support towards further historical research is imperative for the sake of the victims and their descendants.

We therefore appeal to you as delegates and as responsible members of the German Medical Association to take the historical opportunity provided by the 115th German Medical Assembly in Nuremberg to issue a

Nuremberg Declaration of the German Medical Assembly 2012.

We have taken the liberty to formulate a draft for such a declaration.

Nuremberg is and remains bound up with the history of National Socialism and medicine under the Nazi regime. For many years, the city of Nuremberg has faced up to this history in a remarkable manner and has received great international recognition for its efforts.

We wish you a pleasant stay in this city and a good Medical Assembly 2012!

With warm regards from the first signatories,

Prof. Dr. Gerhard Baader, Berlin – Prof. Dr. Johanna Bleeker, Berlin – Dr. Karl Jürgen Bodenschatz, Nuremberg – Sir Iain Chalmers, Oxford – Prof. Dr. Wulf Dietrich, Munich – Prof. Dr. Klaus Dörner, Hamburg – PD Dr. Fritz Dross, Fürth – Dr. Hansjörg Ebell, Munich – Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Eckardt, Heidelberg – Prof. Dr. Frank Erbguth, Nuremberg – Dr. Ursula Ferdinand, Münster – Prof. Dr. Andreas Frewer, Erlangen – Prof. Dr. Helfried Gröbe, Nuremberg – PD. Dr. Bernd Höffken, Nuremberg – Dr. Ellis Huber, Berlin – PD Dr. Gerrit Hohendorf, Munich – PD Dr. Michael Knipper, Gießen – Stephan Kolb, Eckental – Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Kröner, Münster – Prof. Dr. Johannes Kruse, Gießen – Prof. Dr. Karl-Heinz Leven, Erlangen – Prof. Dr. Georg Marckmann, Munich – Dr. Nadine Metzger, Erlangen – Dr. Dr. Günter Niklewski, Nuremberg – Dr. Philipp Osten, Heidelberg – Prof. Dr. Walter Pontzen, Nuremberg – Prof. Dr. Jens Reich, Berlin – Dr. Helmut Rießbeck, Schwabach – Prof. Dr. Volker Roelcke, Gießen – Dr. Maike Rotzoll, Heidelberg – Prof. Dr. Jan Holger Schiffmann, Nuremberg – Prof. Dr. Heinz-Peter Schmiedebach, Hamburg – Prof. Dr. Heinz Schott, Bonn – Dr. Horst Seithe, Nuremberg – Dr. Helmut Sörgel, Nuremberg – Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Söllner, Nuremberg – Prof. Dr. Hannes Wandt, Nuremberg – Prof. Dr. Paul Weindling, Oxford – Prof. Dr. Jörg Wiese, Nuremberg – Dr. Elisabeth Wentzclaff, Nuremberg – Dr. Holger Wentzclaff, Nuremberg – Prof. Dr. Renate Wittern-Sterzel, Erlangen

Nuremberg Declaration of the German Medical Assembly 2012

The 115th German Medical Assembly in 2012 is being held in Nuremberg. This is the city where, 65 years ago, 20 physicians were tried for their roles as leading representatives of the “state medical authorities” of the Nazi regime in committing medical crimes against humanity. Research conducted over the past decades has documented that the extent of human rights violations was vastly greater than documented during the trial. Today, we know considerably more about the goals and practices of various involuntary human experiments, which often ended in death, and the killing of over 200,000 psychologically ill and disabled people, as well as the forced sterilization of over 360,000 individuals classified with “hereditary illness.”

In contrast to still widely accepted views, the initiative for the most serious human rights violations did not originate from the political authorities, but rather from physicians themselves. The crimes were simply not the acts of individual doctors, but rather took place with the substantial involvement of leading representatives of the medical association and medical specialisms as institutional bodies, as well as with the considerable participation of eminent representatives of university medicine and renowned biomedical research facilities.

These human rights violations perpetrated in the name of medicine under the Nazi regime continue to have repercussions to this day and raise questions concerning the way in which physicians perceive themselves, their professional behaviour, and medical ethics.

The 115th German Medical Assembly therefore states in its Nuremberg Declaration of 2012:

- We acknowledge the substantial responsibility of doctors for the medical crimes committed under the Nazi regime and regard these events as a warning for the present and the future.
- We express our deepest regrets that physicians have acted contrary to their medical oath by committing various human rights violations. We pay our respects to all the victims, those still alive today and those who have already died, as well as their descendants and request their forgiveness.
- We commit ourselves as the German Medical Assembly to work towards actively promoting further historical research and the reappraisal of the past through the committees of the German Medical Association and through direct financial aid, as well as through institutional support, such as for unlimited access to archives.