

PROMINENT EPIDEMIOLOGIST VLADIMÍR ZIKMUND PASSED AWAY

Dr Vladimír Zikmund, CSc., Head Emeritus of the Department of Epidemiology of the Regional Public Health Authority in Liberec, passed away on October 18, 2020. He was one of the medical epidemiologists who dedicated his entire life to the prevention of infectious diseases and the development of interventional epidemiology in his homeland and many countries in the world.

Vladimír Zikmund, born on May 27, 1925, in Teplice, completed his studies at the Medical Faculty of Charles University in Prague in 1951. In the years 1951–1980 Dr Zikmund worked as the head of the Department of Epidemiology at the Regional Public Health Authority of the North Bohemian Region in Liberec.

He closely cooperated with the Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology and Professor Raška who paid attention to the involvement of Czechoslovak epidemiologists in World Health Organization (WHO) activities and in the smallpox eradication programme. In 1964 Dr Zikmund began his WHO mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and working and living conditions were very demanding. In 1968, his last year in DRC, with the assistance of Dr Zikmund, an extensive vaccination campaign against smallpox was successfully launched with almost half a million people vaccinated. It is noteworthy that as prof. Raška's student he applied the principles of epidemiological surveillance established in 1968 by the WHO as a standard field epidemiology working method. With the WHO, he continued to work in India (1971–1975). By promoting a “house-to-house” method he made an effective active search for smallpox cases. From India, he was urgently called upon to investigate smallpox in Somalia in 1975, when Africa was already declared smallpox-free. From 1980 to 1988 he worked in South Yemen (1981–1985) and on short missions in Asia, Laos, Cambodia and other.

From the beginning of his professional career, along with the routine field epidemiology he did various research work. With Prof. Liškutin he dealt with disinfection and the effects of detergents. The Liberec region was the first in the Czechoslovak Republic to vaccinate all children against whooping cough. Together with Prof. Raška and other colleagues he did and published outbreak investigation reports, about the large-scale salmonellosis outbreak in the regional city of Liberec (1959), or the of milk-borne hepatitis (1966), and water-borne hepatitis outbreak at school (1972). He also studied the possibility of vaccination with an inactivated influenza vaccine in stigmatized people (1965).

He was among the team that described the endemic plague focus in eastern Congo (1969). He co-authored six articles on various aspects of smallpox eradication. He formulated his experiences in the smallpox eradication programme, at the Ministry of Health of the DRC, in his dissertation, which he defended in 1979. The work of Dr Zikmund in his home Liberec region was an inspiration also to colleagues abroad. Along with about 30 published articles, he is the author of over forty lectures at scientific conferences.

As one of the pioneers of field epidemiology, Dr Zikmund's legacy for society as a whole is unquestionable. Also thanks to him, generations of children do not have to face smallpox anymore. In 2019, he completed his last book, “A Historic Victory over Smallpox” and dedicated it to epidemiologists at all regional hygiene stations in the Czech Republic. In 2017, he received the Tribute to the President of the Liberec Region Award for his contribution to science, research and medicine. In 2018, he was awarded the Medal of the City of Liberec for extraordinary services in the field of epidemiology.

His lifelong field epidemiologist's career was praised on behalf of the WHO by Dr Rosamund Lewis, Head, Smallpox Secretariat, and Dr Maurizio Barbeschi, Senior Advisor, Global Health Security: “WHO is especially grateful for your dedicated efforts to fight infectious disease threats during your whole professional life. Your fieldwork with the goal of immediate action to address a public health problem is a model for contemporary epidemiologists. Communicable diseases continue to represent a formidable challenge to efforts of ensuring public health by the professionals who track and contain them. They also represent an opportunity for the global community to work together to mitigate this risk as you did. Epidemiologists have a key role among multi-professional teams in and across all countries. Your country and the world community still need persons such as yourself to address current threats like measles, influenza, new and emerging viruses, antimicrobial resistance, and vaccine hesitancy, not to mention the ongoing effort to eradicate polio. National and international response to communicable diseases threats urgently need highly qualified surge capacity to keep the world safe.”

We were honoured, dear doctor....

*On behalf of Czechoslovak epidemiologists,
Jana Prattingerová and Vladimír Prikazský*