



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

10th Dialogue on Science – September 14 – 16, 2011 in Engelberg

Klaus Hug, Dr., President Foundation Academia Engelberg

Opening Address

Dear Mr. president of the cantonal executive
dear Mr. abbot of Engelberg
dear friends of the Academia Engelberg
ladies and gentlemen

For the tenth time now, we meet here in the very nice baroque hall to inaugurate the annual conference of Academia Engelberg. Yesterday evening, we commemorated the anniversary with a spiritual cultural event, a scientific presentation and a social dinner among friends. The three parts of the anniversary celebration symbolize our activities: a cultural spiritual connection with the monastery of Engelberg, a scientific focus during the dialogues and a beautiful friendship among the speakers and participants and among the audience in general.

10 years are not a long time; however, during this time, many hours of preparation and work have gone by to organize three-day conferences and follow-up events on a yearly basis. And please note: The organizational committee has practically not changed over the years since 2002. They definitively deserve our warmest thanks right from the beginning.

10 years are not a long time, but they are still sufficient to make a lot of progress in science and to be more aware about the dark side of scientific developments and new challenges for our world. Even if it is already an older buzz word, the “risk society” has not disappeared and will not do so in the future. It is the task of our annual meeting held each autumn in Engelberg to discuss the progress of science and its advantages and disadvantages together with scientists and conference participants. Each development has strong and weak points, each scientific development must be scrutinized and often raises ethical questions and leads to political consequences. Usually, there is a broad basis for discussions that might yield results, bring light into the dark and have long-term effects not only for tomorrow.

For this year's Engelberg Conference, the topic “Personalized Genomics/Medicine” has been chosen. It is a topic that raises far more questions and implications than other issues. For every human being, a special pill? Medicine as something to be customized?



Critical voices rapidly become louder: “There is not much data; it is highly complex and costs are exorbitant”, as Wolf-Dieter Ludwig, president of the German Medical Association’s drug commission put it. The approach to individualized medicine sounds promising, and without any doubt, is tempting. Human sub-groups are formed and categorized according to their genetic information. Tests on the human genome reveal that one and the same disease may often be linked to different genetic variations. Now, the task of individual medicine is to foster tailor-made therapies for every single type of illness. However, there are plenty of obstacles on the way towards success. Sub-groups are small and clear statements regarding the effectiveness of medicine are difficult to be made. “Medicine is increasingly split into rare diseases.” (Thomas Cerny, President of Cancer Research Switzerland). And this leads to high costs of drugs. As a consequence, delicate questions arise: How much may a human life cost for insurance companies and ultimately for society? And how much should we pay to extend human life for a few months? Courts have already dealt with such difficult questions. In the end of the day, it is always a political decision of whether customized medicine does not further raise the cost of health care which is already expensive – leading, as consequence, to a vicious circle.

Still, many scientific innovations have been widely debated at the beginning and were considered an illusion, but over time, they have been accepted. That is why it is definitely not too late for the Academia Engelberg to face the fascinating issue. Many questions. Many answers? We will see.

I would like to thank the program committee and the foundation council members Prof. Gerd Folkers and Prof. Heini Murer for their great work during the preparation of our conference. I also express my thanks to abbot Christian Meyer for his hospitality in the monastery during the conference. We appreciate the fact that he continues the tradition, his predecessor abbot Berchtold Müller initiated with his opening address.

I wish all of you three interesting and challenging days in the monastic village. I now declare the 10th Engelberg Conference open.