

Dear colleagues and partners of the Research Unit for the History and Ethics of Medicine,
It is with great sadness that we have learnt of the death of our former Medical Director

Prof Dr Paul-Otto Schmidt Michel
(1949-2024)

Prof Dr Paul-Otto Schmidt Michel played a key role in shaping the psychiatric landscape and worked tirelessly for the interests of disadvantaged people. To this day, his name is synonymous with social psychiatry and the reform of psychiatry in Eastern Europe in the post-reunification period. His name is also inextricably linked with psychiatric family care in Germany, now known as "Accompanied Living in Families" (BWF). In his dissertation on medical history at the Berlin Institute for the History of Medicine at the Free University of Berlin, he already dealt with 'Alternatives to institutional care'.

In 2006, he initiated the establishment of a historical Research Unit to analyse the history of medicine, and in particular the history of psychiatry and psychotherapy, to which the Wuerttemberg Psychiatry Museum, founded in 2003 and located at two sites (Zwiefalten and Bad Schussenried) since 2010, and the publishing house "Psychiatrie und Geschichte" ("Psychiatry and History") Zwiefalten are linked.

Long before his appointment as Medical Director in 2006, Paul-Otto Schmidt Michel was involved in the social psychiatric aid organisation Arkade e.V. in the district of Ravensburg in the 1980s and was a co-founder of Pauline 13 e.V. in the early 1990s, the counterpart to Arkade in the Lake Constance district. His aim was to create structures outside the hospital system into which mentally ill patients could be discharged.

He also consistently pursued the expansion of community-based psychiatry within the ZfP Suedwuerttemberg. He drove forward the introduction of psychiatric outpatient clinics, was involved in the first satellite ward in the state in Wangen and another one at Friedrichshafen Hospital and established an outpatient crisis service. He did all of this in his own way: quietly, without making a fuss, but at the same time with determination and perseverance.

In addition to his numerous projects in the region, Schmidt-Michel also helped to shape psychiatry at a national level. As a board member of Aktion Psychisch Kranke e.V. (APK), he was heard and recognised by political decision-makers.

Schmidt-Michel saw his task as a doctor as creating an environment in which people could thrive. Accordingly, he was shocked by the medical and structural conditions when he visited a psychiatric clinic in Romania in the 1990s. Together with colleagues, he founded the Beclean e.V. association, which has been fighting for better conditions in Romania ever since and will continue to do so in the future.

The former Medical Director was also deeply moved by the fate of the patients murdered by our predecessors under National Socialism. To commemorate their fate, the memorial to the Grey Buses was created in collaboration with the city of Ravensburg and presented to the public in 2007. It has since become a symbol of remembrance of the murder of the mentally ill far beyond the region and the country.

With the death of Prof Dr Paul-Otto Schmidt-Michel, the ZfP Suedwuerttemberg has lost an outstanding personality. The physician, doer and philanthropist not only shaped our facilities for over three decades, but also remained associated with them after his retirement. His work will live on and his unwavering fight to come to terms with historical crimes and destigmatise psychiatry will continue to have a positive impact long after his death.

For the Executive Board

Dr Dieter Grupp

For the Research Unit for the History and Ethics of medicine

Prof Dr Thomas Müller