

THE LURE OF AFRICA'S WILD LIFE FOR NOBEL SCIENTIST

Harald zur Hausen

To be a Nobel Laureate is no ordinary achievement. For the chosen few often it's recognition for a lifetime of work. And that's certainly true for Prof Harald zur Hausen who spent more than 45 years in medical research to be the sought-after professor that he is today.

Currently a Professor Emeritus and Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Cancer, Prof zur Hausen was at the National Cancer Centre Singapore where he delivered the 6th Humphrey Oei Distinguished Lecture on 2nd April 2009 on "Infectious Causes of Human Cancers: Perspectives".

Prof zur Hausen is best known for his work in virus-induced malignancies and won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2008 for his discovery of human papilloma viruses which cause cervical cancer.

While much is known about the man and his achievements, there are other aspects of Prof zur Hausen which he shared with Salubris in a special interview. Besides his interest in medical research, he is also an avid animal photographer.



Holiday for him and his wife, Prof de Villiers would mean spending time in the wilderness in Africa, where they would go on safari trips.

"We can get real close with the wild and I love photographing them. It's very interesting capturing them on camera and I have lots of shots which I have collected over the years," as he reflected on his trips.

While a few of his shots have been framed up at various places where he worked, but his collection is still growing and "it is becoming a sensitive subject to bring up before my wife", he said laughingly.

His wife is also a virologist and in many ways their work is connected. They have three children, one an investment banker, the second a professor of pathology and the third works with an advertising agency.

Recalling the award of the Nobel Prize, Prof zur Hausen said he almost missed the award ceremony in Stockholm last December when he was among the 300,000 tourists who were stranded in Thailand during the country's political unrest.

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SPECIAL PULL-OUT

SALUBRIS

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Professor Soo Khee Chee, Director of National Cancer Centre, Singapore presenting a memento to Prof Harald zur Hausen.

Groups of demonstrators had seized and crippled Suvarnabhumi Airport and he couldn't get his flight out. Fortunately for Prof zur Hausen, who was in Thailand for a seminar, he could count on the Thai royalty among his friends.

Arrangements were made for him to be whisked off in a special flight out of the country to Singapore, in time to catch a flight back to Germany and thence to receive his Nobel Prize.

If there was one thing that has changed since receiving the Nobel Prize, Prof zur Hausen said it is to find time to cope with the deluge of invitations to

speaking engagements and to contribute articles for various publications.

Prof zur Hausen took time to make a whistle stop to NCCS laboratories and he was pleased that Singapore is among the many countries engaged in international collaborations in cancer research.

"Such collaborations are important and there should be a lot of exchanges among the researchers. It is the right direction to take," he said.

It is best for cancer centres to combine basic and clinical research. "I think it is also important to keep

an open mind for new developments and for researchers to get some training outside of your own building for a period of time. You should go out and work elsewhere to see what others are doing also," he said.

Prof zur Hausen studied medicine at the universities of Bonn, Hamburg and Dusseldorf. He did his post doctoral at the Institute of Microbiology in Dusseldorf before becoming an Assistant Professor in the Virus Laboratories of the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. He was a senior scientist at the Institute of Virology of the University of Wurzburg and chairman and Professor of Virology at the University of Erlangen-Numberg. He moved to a similar position in the University of Freiburg in 1977. From 1983 until 2003, he was the Scientific Director of the Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum (German Cancer Research Center) in Heidelberg.

A strong advocate of getting young girls and boys to get the anti-cancer vaccine before they engage in sexual activity, he however felt that the current price for the vaccine was too high.

"This is something that needs to be addressed. Perhaps there should be greater competition for the production of the vaccine and then the vaccination could be widely applied globally," he explained.

Prof zur Hausen is certainly not one who will rest on his laurels as he feels that there are still many questions about cancer that needs to be answered. "So long as I am able to work actively in this area I will continue to work," said the 73-year-old professor. Currently he has published a comprehensive book on his field of work entitled *Infections Causing Human Cancer*.

By Sunny Wee