

“Everybody Thinks: Killer Virus!”

The medical examiner Klaus Püschel from Hamburg, Germany, autopsies those who died from covid-19 of the city and polarizes with corona theses that appear to downplay the pandemic. In the interview he opposes general fear-mongering and excuses himself for previous statements.

Interviewers Nike Heinen und Kilian Trotier, ZEIT Hamburg, no. 23/2020, 28 May 2020.

The medical examiner Klaus Püschel holds an equally morbid as impressive world record: he is the specialist who has examined the most who died from the pandemic. Researchers around the world now want to work together with him, and first results can be read in his recent highly respected studies. The new virus changes blood clotting in dangerous ways, does damage not only to the lung but also to other organs. But Püschel does not only do research, since weeks he appears in public and formulates snappy theses: that the danger of Sars-CoV-2 is exaggerated, that the dead have been near-death already, and because of that normal life must no longer be restricted. Some celebrate him for this, others accuse him of cynicism. A conversation about social distancing and his name on posters at protests.

Since 1992 Klaus Püschel, aged 68, is director of the Institut for Forensic Medicine at the University Hospital Eppendorf and retires in October.

DIE ZEIT: Dr. Püschel, we wear masks you don't. Does that mean we have already disqualified ourselves in your eyes?

KLAUS PÜSCHEL: (laughs) *No, it just means that you are fearful. (serious) And careful.*

ZEIT: You think the protection is unnecessary?

PÜSCHEL: *I am very critical about it. One permanently touches one's face, breathes constrained, and has very many germs, so this is dangerous for oneself. Except in the cellar, when doing the autopsies, we are reluctant to wear masks at the institute.*

ZEIT: We wear the masks not to protect ourselves but because of you. You are 68, so you belong to the risk group for covid-19.

PÜSCHEL: *As a physician I have to deal with many viruses so that with time I have become calm and seasoned. I simply watch for hygiene. If I were fearful each time I couldn't do my work.*

ZEIT: In one of your first publications, in 1985, you describe what the HI virus does to the body. HIV was a new deadly disease back then, and already then you took a brave attitude.

PÜSCHEL: *True. Indeed, most colleagues did not want to touch those who died from aids. They were very uncertain, some had fear. Somebody had to do it, though. Only if you look into the body you know what happens during an illness.*

ZEIT: Now we have a frightening virus again. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) explicitly recommended against autopsy of covid-19 dead.

PÜSCHEL: *That was inappropriate. Forensic pathologists never know which infectious diseases await them. Therefore we protect ourselves very carefully and also watch that we do not carry anything to the outside. In the meantime, the RKI has changed its recommendation.*

ZEIT: All the roughly 200 who died with Sars-CoV-2 infection in Hamburg come to your institute. This is unique in Germany. How did you achieve this?

PÜSCHEL: *The public authorities of Hamburg work rationally and accept advice from somebody like me who stands for these topics since four decades. In particular, the public health officers, who have to order the autopsies, know me. We assign the examinations across our team, but I take a look at each case, the project is very important to me.*

ZEIT: In your recent publications you and your co-authors describe lungs full of water which are practically free of air. Organs full of immune cells, blood clots everywhere. There was a fight, virus against immune system, and obviously the immune system did not have a chance. How do these changes fit to your assertion that the illness is relatively harmless?

PÜSCHEL: *Most people go through this without harm. But some courses of the illness are severe this is obvious. It is clear that not only the lung is affected but apparently the kidney too. And also in the brain and the heart muscle things can happen. Nevertheless I would like to emphasize that all who have died had grave pre-existing illnesses which strongly limited their life expectancy. I emphasized that emphatically in public to take away the fear from ordinary citizens.*

ZEIT: You said, “they were ripe.” Do you regret that you chose such a formulation?

PÜSCHEL: *I regret that some people felt that I treated them disrespectfully. I would now say it in a different way. Some wrote to me that I did not answer to their distress and judge elderly human life superficially. I regret that and say that I do not make any difference between old and young life. If a person aged 89 is killed I investigate that with great consequence, there is no discount for the delinquent. Nevertheless, the Hamburg covid-19 dead did have a strongly shortened life expectancy.*

ZEIT: Strongly shortened does not mean that the person would have died within the next months anyway.

PÜSCHEL: *People confront me by saying that an eighty year-old has a prognosis of eight or ten years. I reply: this is a general statement which does not need to hold for those we examined. And the attending physician could not make that statement unambiguously with blood tests and images either. Only for single cases and with a full autopsy can eight or ten years be assessed.*

ZEIT: Is it really possible to estimate months or years with your methods?

PÜSCHEL: *No, I cannot say if somebody would have had three months or a year.*

ZEIT: So “ripe” was gut feeling?

PÜSCHEL: *I give an estimate: the person was severely ill and imminent death was to be expected. Of course, this could also last one or two years. But this does not change the principle statement. We still did not have a single child, no adolescent, nobody from the working population as covid-19 case here in the forensic institute.*

ZEIT: You said in public that the current excess mortality due to covid-19 will not be there at the end of the year. This means that the pandemic kills people now who would have died during this year anyway. Now you say that you cannot estimate months. Isn't this a contradiction?

PÜSCHEL: *It is sad for any person who dies, independent of age. But if I look at the statistics of the covid-19 dead and compare it with other medical problems it does not worry me. I estimate the death rate to less than one percent. We, as a society, focus on these dead so much that everybody gets fear. Everybody thinks: killer virus! They read the naked numbers, more than 8000 dead, and think: I am next. But there are around 900,000 deaths in Germany in a year and the 8000 have the same average age, 80. At the institute we currently calculate if Hamburg really has excess mortality. I am curious about the results. What I fight first of all is the blanked fear-mongering.*

ZEIT: You always say fear. But if one practices distancing and tries to stop drips and aerosols, isn't that with reason?

PÜSCHEL: *Distance and hand washing is reasonable. I find it entirely unreasonable how children and old people are isolated. I have grandchildren and I see how their life and that of their parents has changed. I often have to think of my mother, she is no longer alive. Should I say, fortunately? I would like to know what she would have said to visiting prohibition. I would bet roughly this: “Of course you are visiting me, boy!” And I would have better not objected.*

ZEIT: Those rules were not made for fun. The point was to protect vulnerable people as much as possible.

PÜSCHEL: *But what does it mean, to protect? Old people need their family. Directly at their bed. In particular those who are severely ill! That old people are treated well is something I argued for my whole life. I made studies how to recognize neglect. And now I see pictures of glass boxes in front of retirement homes from which grandma waive at the children. This is terrible! What a world is this? You cut off people from their life, take away meaning and happiness. Indeed, those pictures. You journalists boil all this up too much.*

ZEIT: What does this mean?

PÜSCHEL: *From Italy there were heaps of coffins, military convoys with corpses.*

ZEIT: The pictures show what happened.

PÜSCHEL: *But who knows the background? One is that the Italians could not bury their dead so they put them on heaps. One of my friend from a crematory told me that in Italy they have bad incineration furnaces which quickly reach their limits. Journalists again and again show pictures that create fear. Equally pictures from intensive care units with patients normally in theirs beds but with the hint that the station is completely overfilled. This was not the case everywhere. Someone from a hospital in Milan called me and said they always had free beds. .*

ZEIT: There are totally different reports from emergency admissions in Milan. And there were never before pictures full of coffins, not even in heavy outbreaks. So your media bashing appears strange.

PÜSCHEL: *I can only judge the situation in Northern Germany. Of course the situation is strained, we have a pandemic! Nevertheless, one always has to watch things from two sides. If this virus comes to a retirement home with very old, very sick people then there are many deaths, yes. But even there most of them survive. It annoys me that only the bad side is told, not how good things can turn out.*

ZEIT: Physicians from Hamburg who knew covid-19 victims disagree with you. They say, our patients were perhaps already 83, but bodily fit and we would not have expected that they die so quickly from an infection.

PÜSCHEL: *Of course there are 83-year old ones who are fairly fit – compared to other 83-year old ones. But they are not 40 anymore. It happened on occasion that I found something the physicians did not know of. Kidney damage, strongly constricted arteries, former heart attacks.*

ZEIT: So from your findings you conclude: let the elderly go to their near death a little earlier so that the younger ones can have a more free life?

PÜSCHEL: *You turn my words in my mouth as if I hold up social darwinist principles. I grant the old ones the last period of their lives. But for the old ones to live a little longer we lock in the young ones. This can be questioned in this absoluteness.*

ZEIT: The German constitution says about human dignity “to respect and protect it is the obligation of all state power.” This applies to old people too.

PÜSCHEL: *But also to children. I am one of those who would like to see children’s rights in the constitution! Wolfgang Schäuble nicely says, no everything must stand back for the protection of life.*

ZEIT: That the children remain at home for some months is a much smaller annoyance than the risk of the old people to die from the virus. Why isn’t that acceptable?

PÜSCHEL: *It is an achievement that we care of old people and treat them well medically. But first of all you should let them decide how much they want to protect themselves. And their protection does*

not stand above the interest of everybody else. One needs to put this into the right relation. Also, the wish to save everybody is questionable from a medical point of view.

ZEIT: The restrictions were supposed to protect the health care system from collapse.

PÜSCHEL: *I did support this and accept the political decisions. Dealing with the pandemic was apparently successful in Germany. But now we have to talk how we are going to live with the virus.*

ZEIT: How would you do it?

PÜSCHEL: *I would do much more testing and operate regionally according to the situation. As long as hospitals are resilient I would allow more illnesses. Remain relaxed, like in the last pandemic, the Hong Kong flu 1968. I would not restrict the contact of families if somebody is positive. This is how we do it in our family. All three generations agree with this. If it hits anybody we do not isolate them. Our bodies need to expose themselves to the virus. As many as possible need to get the infection.*

ZEIT: England miserably failed with this approach.

PÜSCHEL: *I would not have done this at the beginning but now.*

ZEIT: Your name appears on posters at the so-called hygiene protests. Does it disturb you that you are a hero for these people?

PÜSCHEL: *I congratulate all pensioners who say that they themselves want to determine how they are supposed to live.*

ZEIT: But there are also conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists who take up your positions.

PÜSCHEL: *I don't want to have anything to do with them. I advocate a scientific workup of this disease and a self-determined life in dealing with the risk. It would be rational to sort the pandemic into the many dangers and illnesses which exist in the world and in life. In my institute I repeatedly see people who consciously accepted great risks. As smoker, at dinner, at sex. They should do it as long as they don't threaten other people. We should live our life as long as we have it. ■*