



PRESS RELEASE

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The Virchow Prize 2026 Awarded for Pioneering Work on Ebola, Advancing Global Epidemic Preparedness and Fostering Global Solidarity

Jean-Jacques Muyembe and Peter Piot are being honored with the international award of €500,000 for exceptional life-long leadership spanning five decades since the first outbreak of Ebola | Festive award ceremony on October 10 at Berlin City Hall

The Virchow Prize 2026 is bestowed upon

Jean-Jacques Muyembe

Université de Kinshasa, DR Congo
Institut National de Recherche Biomédicale, DR Congo

Peter Piot

Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp, Belgium
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK

„for their pioneering and enduring leadership in the discovery, control, and understanding of epidemic threats, and for advancing equitable, multilateral cooperation and governance that have fundamentally strengthened global preparedness and solidarity in the face of infectious disease outbreaks”

The announcement was made today by the Virchow Foundation, granting the annual award endowed with €500,000. The selection of the laureates by the independent Virchow Prize Committee was preceded by a nomination period that ended on February 28, followed by a three-month deliberation period.

This moment resonates with particular historical gravity: 2026 marks both fifty years since the emergence of Ebola and a renewed confrontation with the virus through the current outbreak and unpreparedness.

According to the committee, the careers of Jean-Jacques Muyembe and Peter Piot are anchored in a defining moment of modern infectious disease history: the first identified Ebola outbreak in 1976. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Muyembe led field investigations under challenging conditions, gathering crucial samples and laying the foundation for identifying the Ebola virus. At the same time, Piot, working in Belgium, analyzed the samples from the field and contributed to the scientific characterization of this previously unknown pathogen. Their collaboration demonstrated the necessity of crossing contextual, disciplinary and geographic boundaries, highlighting both the potential and the inequities inherent in global health partnerships. Over the decades, both Muyembe and Piot have worked – partly closely together, partly independent from each other in complementary ways – to transform epidemic research in an exemplary manner, firmly rooted in equity, reciprocity, and shared leadership.

Taken together, the laureates’ contributions illustrate a continuum that is central to advancing health for all: from discovery to delivery, from local response to global coordination, from emergency action to long-term system strengthening. Their work has directly improved the ability to detect, understand, and control deadly outbreaks, while also influencing broader frameworks for addressing global health challenges in a manner that is equitable and inclusive.

By awarding the Virchow Prize 2026 equally to Jean-Jacques Muyembe and Peter Piot, their scientific achievements and their commitment to strengthening health systems and fostering global solidarity are honored. The laureates’ legacy embodies Rudolf Virchow’s insight that health is inseparable from social organisation, governance, and collective responsibility.

The festive Virchow Prize Ceremony, attended by 300 high-ranking international guests from science, academia, politics, civil society, and the private sector, will take place on Saturday, October 10, 2026, at Berlin City Hall (Rotes Rathaus Berlin).

Complete Rationale of the Virchow Prize Committee: www.virchowprize.org/vp2026

About the Virchow Prize and the Virchow Foundation

With its annual awarding of the Virchow Prize, the non-profit Virchow Foundation highlights and supports the efforts of the United Nations to preserve the health of people and the planet by setting a leading example of underscoring health as predestined entry point to and most important outcome of the UN 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by emphasizing the health-related interdependencies of all 17 SDGs. The Virchow Prize honors individuals and organisations for their groundbreaking innovations, outstanding contributions and lifetime achievements in improving global health on the path to 'health for all'. The Virchow Foundation was established in 2021 on the occasion of the 200th birthday of its namesake Rudolf Virchow, with support of the Presidents of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities as well as Members of the German Bundestag and civil society, aiming to contribute to the improvement of health worldwide. More than 40 leading international experts serve the Virchow Foundation's committees on an honorary basis.

Further information:

- Complete Virchow Prize Committee jury rationale: attached and at virchowprize.org/vp2026
- Virchow Prize & Virchow Foundation website: virchowprize.org

Images:

- Photographs of the Virchow Prize 2026 Laureates: virchowprize.org/media/Muyembe-Piot.jpg

Caption:

The Virchow Prize 2026 Laureates: Jean-Jacques Muyembe (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Peter Piot (Belgium)

Photo credit: private

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THE VIRCHOW PRIZE 2026 ANNOUNCEMENT

Today’s decision to award the Virchow Prize 2026 jointly to Jean-Jacques Muyembe and Peter Piot honors not only two extraordinary individual scientists, but also a shared trajectory that has profoundly shaped the modern understanding of infectious disease and outbreak preparedness, global health governance, and the indispensable role of investments in strengthening international institutions and global solidarity. Their intertwined contributions span from the earliest encounter with one of the most feared pathogens of our time – the Ebola virus – to the evolution of global systems for epidemic response, prevention, and cooperation. In doing so, they embody the very spirit of Rudolf Virchow’s insight that health is inseparable from social organization, governance, and collective responsibility.

The careers of Muyembe and Piot are anchored in one of the defining moments of modern infectious disease history: the emergence of Ebola in 1976 – exactly 50 years ago. In the remote region of Yambuku in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Muyembe, working under conditions of profound scarcity, confronted a mysterious and deadly outbreak. Without protective equipment, laboratory infrastructure, or established protocols, he conducted field investigations, collected clinical samples, and sought to understand the nature of a rapidly spreading disease. His work laid the essential groundwork for identifying the pathogen and for developing initial strategies of containment¹. At the same time, in Antwerp, Belgium, Piot and colleagues analyzed the samples sent from the field, contributing to the identification of a previously unknown virus and helping to shape the first scientific characterization of Ebola. Two weeks after arrival of the samples, Piot travelled to Yambuku and joined the local team of Muyembe undertaking field investigations on source and spread of the virus.

This moment was not simply one of scientific discovery; it was a powerful demonstration of the necessity of collaboration across contexts, disciplines, and geographies, highlighting our interconnectedness and shared vulnerability. The flow of knowledge – from rural Congo to European laboratories and back into the field – illustrated both the possibilities and the inequities inherent in global health partnerships. Over the decades, both Muyembe and Piot have worked, partly independent from each other in complementary ways, partly closely together, to transform that model into one rooted more firmly in equity, reciprocity, and shared leadership – and one unleashed from the colonial vestiges of the global governance system.

Jean-Jacques Muyembe chose to remain in his home country and build scientific capacity where it was most urgently needed. He played a decisive role in investigating numerous Ebola outbreaks over subsequent decades, advancing clinical understanding, refining strategies for patient care, and contributing to the development of novel therapies. Muyembe is the co-inventor of the monoclonal antibody mAb114, the first FDA-approved Ebola treatment.

Furthermore, Muyembe has made substantial contributions to building outbreak research and responses. He has set up a substantial surveillance, laboratory diagnostic and clinical infrastructure that continues to be at the forefront of outbreaks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and beyond, e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic, recent Mpox outbreaks, and now with the new 2026 Ebola outbreak showing again its significant relevance.

These investments in national institution building, training and capacity development have ensured that future responses to epidemics in the DRC and the wider region would be led increasingly by local expertise. This includes Muyembe heading the National Institute of Biomedical Research (INRB), which has been a WHO Collaborating Centre since 2018, and serving as the inaugural President of the Congolese Academy of Science. His work challenges and successfully counters the historical marginalization of scientists from the Global South and exemplifies the importance of investing in enduring, locally anchored research and response systems.

Jean-Jacques Muyembe has been recognized by numerous international awards, including the Christophe Mérieux Prize, the Royal Society Africa Prize, the government of Japan's Hideyo Noguchi Africa Prize and, together with Peter Piot, the WHO Director-General's Global Health Leaders Awards. He was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre National de Léopard of the DRC and an Honorary International Fellow of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH). Muyembe furthermore received the African Union CPHIA Lifetime Achievement Award in Public Health.

Peter Piot extended the lessons of Ebola into a broader rethinking of global health governance. His leadership in the response to HIV/AIDS and his guiding role as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Founding Executive Director of UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, marked a profound shift in how the world addresses complex, transnational health crises.

Piot has consistently emphasized that infectious diseases cannot be understood or controlled in isolation from the social, economic, and political environments in which they spread. And that is precisely the fundamental essence and very heart of Virchow's legacy. By bringing together multiple agencies of the United Nations system and advocating for coordinated, multisectoral action, he has been instrumental in shaping a new model of global cooperation that recognizes that effective responses require not only science, but also solidarity, shared responsibility, and sustained political commitment – a systemic and holistic model which is now being put to the test in a way that has not been seen for a generation.

Piot is a member of the US National Academy of Medicine, the National Academy of Medicine of France, the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium, and a fellow of the UK Academy of Medical Sciences and the Royal College of Physicians.

He is Chair of the Scientific Council of the Institut Pasteur de Dakar (Senegal) and of the Strategic Council of the Pasteur Network. Furthermore, he has been Vice-Chair of GHIT Fund, Tokyo (Japan), and a founding Board Member of CEPI and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Peter Piot has received numerous awards, among them the John Dirks Canada Gairdner Global Health Award, Prince Mahidol Award, Robert Koch Gold Medal, Hideyo Noguchi Africa Prize, Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights, and, together with Jean-Jacques Muyembe, the WHO Director-General's Global Health Leaders Awards. He was ennobled a Baron by King Albert II of Belgium and Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George in the UK. Further honors include the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun in Japan.

Taken together, the contributions of Muyembe and Piot illustrate a continuum that is central to advancing health for all: from discovery to delivery, from local response to global coordination, from emergency action to long-term system strengthening. Their work has directly improved the ability to detect, understand, and control deadly outbreaks, while also influencing broader frameworks for addressing global health challenges in a manner that is equitable and leaves no one behind.

This legacy is particularly resonant in the context of the present moment. Recent Ebola outbreaks, as well as other re-emerging infectious threats, remind us that the conditions that give rise to epidemics – ecological disruption, fragile health systems, inequality, and mobility – persist and, in many cases, are intensifying and rendering the whole world vulnerable.

While scientific advances have dramatically improved the availability of diagnostics, vaccines, and treatments, the laureates remind us on the need for ongoing vigilance in surveillance and investments in these tools and underscore that the effectiveness of these tools depends on the strength of the systems that deploy them and the trust of the communities they serve. The experiences of past and current Ebola outbreaks have shown that even the most sophisticated biomedical interventions can falter in the absence of robust public health infrastructure, political leadership, community engagement, and international coordination.

In this regard, the work of Muyembe and Piot remains profoundly relevant. Their careers underscore the necessity of preparedness – not as a technical exercise alone, but as a sustained commitment to building resilient systems, fostering collaboration, and ensuring equitable access to knowledge and resources. They remind us that the response to any outbreak is only as strong as the networks of cooperation that underpin it.

Equally, their joint recognition speaks directly to the enduring importance of multilateralism. In an era marked by geopolitical tensions and fragmentation, the management of global health threats requires institutions that can convene, coordinate, and act across borders. The architecture that has evolved over the past decades – from WHO-led initiatives to broader partnerships involving governments, civil society, philanthropies, and research institutions – owes much to the vision and leadership exemplified by figures such as Piot, and to the practical experience and credibility of leaders such as Muyembe. Their work demonstrates that multilateral institutions are not abstract constructs, but living mechanisms that translate shared values into action, enabling countries to respond collectively to threats that no nation can address alone.

Moreover, the joint recognition of an African and a European scientist carries deep symbolic and substantive significance. It reflects the interdependence of regions and the recognition that global health progress depends on collaboration across continents, and between Africa and Europe not least. For too long, narratives of scientific discovery and innovation have been dominated by perspectives from high-income settings.

Honoring Muyembe affirms the central role of African expertise and leadership in addressing challenges that disproportionately affect the continent. At the same time, through Piot, it reinforces the importance of equitable partnerships, in which knowledge, recognition, and resources are shared more justly.

Finally, the choice of Muyembe and Piot resonates strongly with Virchow's own legacy. Virchow insisted that medicine is a social science and that health is shaped by political and societal conditions. He called for action not only in laboratories and clinics, but also in the structures that govern society. In different but complementary ways, both laureates have embodied this principle. Muyembe has brought innovation and scientific excellence into the most challenging field conditions, guided by a commitment to his communities and to building local capacity. Piot has translated scientific insight into global action, helping to reshape policies, institutions, and norms at the highest levels.

A joint award to Jean-Jacques Muyembe and Peter Piot recognizes more than individual achievements. It affirms a decolonized model of global health that is collaborative, equitable, and deeply attuned to the interplay between science and society. It sends a timely message in the face of ongoing and future epidemics: that preparedness, solidarity, and strong multilateral institutions are not optional, but essential. And it highlights and is a shining example for the enduring importance of global solidarity comprising partnerships between Africa and Europe, more broadly between the Global South and North and on a worldwide international scale, as a foundation for advancing health for all.

¹ Breman JG, Heymann DL, Lloyd G, McCormick JB, Miatudila M, Murphy FA, Muyembé-Tamfun JJ, Piot P, Ruppel JF, Sureau P, van der Groen G, Johnson KM. Discovery and Description of Ebola Zaire Virus in 1976 and Relevance to the West African Epidemic During 2013-2016. *J Infect Dis.* 2016 Oct 15;214(suppl 3):S93-S101. doi: 10.1093/infdis/jiw207. Epub 2016 Jun 29. PMID: 27357339; PMCID: PMC5050466