

Collegium Ramazzini Statement on the Judicial Harassment of Dr. Bulent Sik

The Collegium Ramazzini is an independent, international society comprised of 180 physicians and scientists from 35 countries. Its mission is to increase scientific knowledge of the environmental and occupational causes of disease and to transmit this knowledge to decision-makers, the media and the global public in order to prevent disease, promote good health and save lives.

The Collegium Ramazzini expresses grave concern over the decision by Turkish authorities to prosecute Dr. Bulent Sik for announcing the findings of a cancer research study conducted by the Ministry of Health.

Dr. Bülent Şık is a distinguished food engineer. His research specializes in the development of analytic methods for measuring toxic residues in food such as pesticides, polyaromatic hydrocarbons and heavy metals. He was a lecturer at Akdeniz University from 2009 to 2015 and played an active role in establishing the university's Food Safety and Agricultural Research Center (FSARC) where he served as Technical Deputy Director from 2010 to 2015. He subsequently was a faculty member at Antalya University until November 22, 2016 when he was dismissed as per Statutory Decree no. 677 along with hundreds of other Turkish academics who had signed a peace petition protesting Turkey's military attacks and violence against Kurdish civilians.

Dr. Sik was involved from 2011 and 2015 in a large research project conducted at FSARC under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Health that measured levels of carcinogenic chemicals in thousands of samples of soil, foods, air, surface water and groundwater from across Turkey to assess whether these exposures were linked to increasing incidence rates of cancer. In this study, Dr. Sik was involved in analyses of environmental samples and also in data analysis.

The study found health-threatening levels of pesticides, heavy metals, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons in multiple food and water samples in Kocaeli and in three other Turkish cities - Kırklareli, Tekirdağ, and Edirne, all of them located in the Ergene River basin. In some residential areas, the water was totally undrinkable because of lead, aluminum, chrome and arsenic pollution.

These findings were kept secret by the Health Ministry and interim reports presenting the findings were not published. Additionally, public institutions were not warned, and no precautions were taken to reduce exposures or to warn the public.

Dr. Sik was deeply concerned by the Health Ministry's decision not to release these findings and by the Ministry's failure to protect public health. Accordingly, he promulgated the study's findings to the public by publishing them as a series of articles in *Cumhuriyet*, one of the most important and oldest daily newspapers in Turkey.

After publication of these articles, an investigation was launched against Dr. Sik based upon a complaint submitted by the Ministry of Health. The stated reasons for the investigation are "disclosure of secrets about duty" (Turkish Penal Code Article No. 258); "provision of prohibited information" (Turkish Penal Code Article No. 334); "disclosure of prohibited information" (Turkish Penal Code Article No. 336) and other charges to be filed."

Dr. Sik's first court hearing was held in İstanbul on 7th February 2019. In his defence, Dr. Sik stated that:

"It is an academician's responsibility to reveal research results and to urge the public to take precautions if research reveals findings that threaten public health. Concealing life-threatening research findings and disregarding the public's right to know is not acceptable. In such a case, an academician must not obey privacy agreements. A scientist is primarily responsible to society and not to companies and institutions, because the health and the future of society are more important than the short-term interests of companies and institutions."

A second hearing in Dr. Sik's case is scheduled to be held on 30 May 2019

The Collegium Ramazzini calls upon Turkish authorities to acquit Dr. Sik and stop this investigation. Failing that, the Collegium Ramazzini calls upon members of the international community and academics to follow Dr. Sik's case and protect freedom of speech and freedom of research in Turkey.