

## PRESS RELEASE

## 41st WHO Sasakawa Health Prize Awarded to Denmark's Dr. Merete Nordentoft For Work on Suicide Prevention in Young People

TOKYO, May 23, 2025 The 41st WHO Sasakawa Health Prize was presented to Danish psychiatrist Dr. Merete Nordentoft in recognition of her work on suicide prevention in young people, during a ceremony at the 78th World Health Assembly in Geneva on May 23.

The award highlights a science- and practice-based strategy for tackling the serious public health issue of suicide, which kills more than 700,000 people worldwide every year and is one of the leading causes of death among 15- to 29-year-olds.

Dr. Nordentoft's approach to suicide prevention and early intervention in psychosis, particularly among young people, has produced striking results. It has been implemented throughout Denmark and is considered a model for other countries.



Dr. Merete Nordentoft (second from left), winner of the 41st WHO Sasakawa Health Prize, poses with Yohei Sasakawa, chairman of The Nippon Foundation (right), WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (second from right) and Dr. Teodoro J. Herbosa, president of the 78th World Health Assembly (left), following the award ceremony at the World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland on May 23, 2025.

In 1998, she launched the OPUS Outreach Treatment Program, an early intervention program for first-time psychiatric patients aged 18 to 45. The program is based on a multidisciplinary team offering weekly meetings with a primary staff member, recovery-oriented groups and family involvement. It has been recognized for reducing hospitalization rates and improving quality of life, as well as for its emphasis on the role of community and family.

The name OPUS (“work”) is taken from the world of music and was chosen to express the need to orchestrate a carefully prepared plan in which the different elements of the program are in harmony with each other. OPUS aims to integrate psychiatric, psychological and social interventions where the interplay between them is crucial.

In accepting the award, Dr. Nordentoft said: “It is a privilege to stand here today—not only for myself, but for the young people with psychosis, their families and the colleagues who have made this journey possible.” The award, she said, “gives voice to those young people—and reinforces that with the right support, early enough, recovery is not only possible—it is likely.”

The award ceremony was attended by WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and the prize was presented to Dr. Nordentoft by Yohei Sasakawa, chairman of The Nippon Foundation.

“This is the first time the prize has honored efforts in the field of mental health,” said Sasakawa, “and Dr. Nordentoft’s work is a pioneering practice, as the WHO’s suicide prevention initiative, LIVE LIFE, emphasizes the importance of strengthening support and prevention measures at the local level, as well as a primary health care approach.”

The prize money of US\$30,000 will be used to host a conference that will bring together clinicians, researchers and patients to deepen discussions on optimizing treatments.

### Sasakawa Health Prize

The Sasakawa Health Prize was established in 1984 upon the initiative and with funds provided by Ryoichi Sasakawa, then president of the Japan Shipbuilding Foundation (now The Nippon Foundation) and president of Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation (now Sasakawa Health Foundation), and with the agreement of WHO Director-General Dr. Halfdan Mahler, with the aim of contributing to the realization of WHO’s “Health for All” philosophy. The award recognizes individuals and organizations that have made significant contributions to improving people’s health and well-being through sustainable and effective activities, such as the promotion of primary health care and specific health programs at the local level.

## Sasakawa Health Foundation

Sasakawa Health Foundation was established in 1974 by Ryoichi Sasakawa (1899 – 1995), founder of The Nippon Foundation, and Professor Morizo Ishidate (1901 – 1996), the father of leprosy chemotherapy in Japan, for the purpose of eradicating leprosy from the world. Since its establishment, the foundation has maintained its focus on leprosy while also engaging in activities to combat parasitic diseases and HIV/AIDS, providing medical cooperation following the Chernobyl nuclear accident, developing human resources in the field of international health, and improving hospice palliative care. The foundation currently focuses its work on leprosy control and the promotion of community health. It is engaged in a variety of projects both in Japan and overseas, based on the principle of “Better Health and Dignity for All.”

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