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There are more viruses than stars. What's the favourite virus of the world's top virologist, Erling Norrby? When was awarded the doctor honoris causa degree at Charles University on 30 January, we took the opportunity to ask him.



Professor Norrby prefers the adenovirus, from which you can tell that he likes not just viruses, but mathematics as well. There are the five platonic bodies and three regular dimensional bodies, the most complex of which is the icosahedron. The adenovirus is shaped like a beautiful icosahedron, with 12 'spikes' sticking out of its vertices, and it was Prof. Norrby who discovered these 'spikes'.

The spikes were discovered through the ability of the vertex structure to form a small structure of its own - a dodecahedral cage. In classical Greek literature, the five platonic bodies represent earth, fire, air and water, with the fifth being a dodecahedron. "Each face of a dodecahedron has five edges. If you draw a line between two corners you get the proportion - the golden section. Nature uses systems and symmetry as a way of economising in order to achieve maximum volume for maximum surface," explained Prof. Norrby.

Scientist or teacher?

When Dean of the Medical Faculty of Karolinska Institutet in Sweden, Norrby did his utmost to find the best teachers. He is of the belief that there is no substitute for a teacher. It is the teacher who inspires students to become interested in particular fields, conveys new, relevant information and relates it to current events.

But, according to Norrby, there is still a disparity in the credit given to scientists and teachers. "We give credit to good scientist if they publish in Science or Nature, but how do we give teachers credit? I don't have a good answer to that," he stated. Scientists should, though, be out teaching, which is beneficial is not just to students, but to scientists as well, as shown in practise at Harvard.

Soul and mind

Norrby believes in a healthy soul and body. As a jogger, he used to set himself one modest goal each year - a 30 km cross country race in Stockholm. While he has taken part in the race 25 times, in the last two years he has done the 15 km race instead. "The important thing is not the race, but that you get some exercise and enjoy what you are doing."