



German psychologist Hans-Ulrich Wittchen is accused of fabricating data in a survey of psychiatry clinics.
MITTENZWEI KARL/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/BERLINER ZEITUNG

Top German psychologist fabricated data, investigation finds

By [Hristio Boytchev](#) | Apr. 8, 2021, 4:00 AM

Hans-Ulrich Wittchen, one of Germany's top psychologists and an expert in treating anxiety and phobias, is not shy about promoting himself. His email signature says he is a "highly cited researcher," and with good reason. He has almost 1000 articles to his name, according to the Web of Science, and has racked up nearly 70,000 citations. He is an editor of Germany's diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders—the bible of clinical psychology—and until 2017, he led a psychology research institute at the Dresden University of Technology (TU Dresden).

Yet his reputation is under fire after an investigation into one of his studies found evidence of manipulation—and elaborate efforts to cover up the misdeed. The investigation report, turned over to TU Dresden in February and obtained by *Science*, also shows Wittchen intimidated whistleblowers and pressured senior TU Dresden staff. The Federal Joint Committee (G-BA), a public health organization, is suing the company it paid to do the study. And the Dresden public prosecutor's office is now investigating criminal charges related to the study.

Wittchen was one of the top epidemiologists of psychiatry, and TU Dresden "has benefited greatly from him," says Jürgen Margraf, a psychologist at Ruhr University, Bochum, who has collaborated with Wittchen. "If the commission's findings turn out to be true, they are very disturbing for the entire field, and that would also have an impact on TU Dresden." Thomas Pollmächer, director of the mental health center at Ingolstadt Hospital, says the allegations are "startling." He worries about other possible irregularities in Wittchen's extensive publication record. "Some time bombs may be ticking," he says.

The study in question was a €2.4 million survey of staffing levels and quality at nearly 100 German psychiatric facilities. Working for TU Dresden's Association for Knowledge and Technology Transfer (GWT), Wittchen was the principal investigator of the effort, which aimed to examine workloads at the clinics and inform government regulations.

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But in February 2019, German media reported allegations, stemming from whistleblowers close to the survey project, **that study data had been fabricated**. The university launched a formal investigation, led by law professor Hans-Heinrich Trute.

After 2 years of work, the commission, in its final report, has found that only 73 of 93 psychiatric clinics were actually surveyed. For the others, the report says, Wittchen instructed researchers to copy data from one clinic and apply them to another. “The violations were intentional, not negligent,” the report says. “Wittchen wanted to appear more successful than he was.”

Wittchen told *Science* he would not answer detailed questions “because they are the issue of legal proceedings.” But he denies any wrongdoing and says the study in question was “scientifically correct.”

The investigation report also shows how Wittchen sought to avoid repercussions. In April 2019, he sent an email to Hans Müller-Steinhagen, president of TU Dresden at the time, warning him to “stay out of the project” and stop the investigation, because otherwise there would be a “national political earthquake.” “I would like to warn you ... once again personally and confidentially that you are taking an extreme risk here,” Wittchen wrote in the email.

The two whistleblowers, junior members of GWT, faced pressure, too, according to emails obtained by *Science*. Wittchen asked GWT’s director to consider dismissing the whistleblowers—in order to save money. In another document, he accused them of being responsible for the study irregularities. “I will ... defend myself with all legal means against this mess,” he wrote to a group of survey researchers that included the whistleblowers. According to the commission report, Wittchen even gave the two whistleblowers a prewritten letter to sign, in which they would retract all accusations and apologize.

Investigators found indications that Wittchen manipulated documents to cover his tracks, including presentation slides, emails, and possibly even signatures. He has “shown a willingness to mislead the investigation from the beginning by means of deception and manipulation,” the report says. “If these observations were true, they would be within the realm of criminal sanctions.”

For his part, Wittchen says the problems with the survey were an innocent mistake. In a 70-page denial included in the investigation report, he claims the duplicated data in the survey were statistically correct and simply not explained properly.

Although the report focused on the alleged scientific misconduct, it also includes hints of possible corruption. It notes allegations that Wittchen employed his daughter in the project for about 2 years—although the other staff never saw her doing any work on it. Wittchen’s daughter declined to comment on the allegations.

The commission finds fault with TU Dresden and GWT for not sufficiently protecting the whistleblowers, who remained subordinate to Wittchen during the investigation. When one of the whistleblowers asked GWT for a job reference, the request ended up with Wittchen, who gave him a poor reference.

The commission also criticizes Katja Beesdo-Baum, a behavioral epidemiologist at TU Dresden and longtime colleague of Wittchen’s who was deputy head of the survey project. A few days after the allegations became public in February 2019, Beesdo-Baum called an extraordinary meeting of the institute. There, employees were reminded of their duty to maintain secrecy, says a professor who was present at the time, according to the report. The employees “had the feeling of being muzzled,” he says. Beesdo-Baum says the commission did not accuse her of misconduct and that her role in the affair will be discussed internally.

Wittchen gave up his professorship at TU Dresden in 2017 when he reached an age limit. In 2017, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich hired him as a visiting professor, but a spokesperson says it suspended Wittchen’s contract this month, after learning of the allegations. Last month, the

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university deleted the 2017 press release announcing its hiring of Wittchen. In a statement, the German Psychological Society says it considers the allegations in the report so “very grave” that it has convened a court of honor that could revoke Wittchen’s membership. GWT issued a statement saying that in its 25 years of existence, across thousands of studies, it has never encountered “comparable irregularities.”

Meanwhile, a TU Dresden spokesperson says the university is investigating additional allegations of corruption. It is evaluating possible sanctions against Wittchen and expects to make a decision in mid-April, at the earliest. The Dresden public prosecutor’s office has also launched a criminal investigation. The office says that for “tactical reasons” it is not disclosing details of the investigation but that it will “take some time.”

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