


## At This Stage: Michael Zimpfer, EXP-3

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### In Vienna



**Talk about intense career moments: for physician Michael Zimpfer, EXP-3, it was diagnosing Ukrainian leader Viktor Yushchenko with dioxin poisoning.**

"I had little experience with poisonings and with criminal acts," says Michael Zimpfer, EXP-3. Nevertheless, this was the mysterious situation he faced in 2004 as chief anesthesiologist and intensive care physician at Vienna General Hospital. In the midst of the hotly contested Ukrainian presidential elections, candidate Viktor Yushchenko was referred to Zimpfer's hospital in Austria, having become violently ill, his face badly disfigured by an inscrutable ailment.

It was at this time of great uncertainty, with no clear diagnosis and no one to tell him what to do, that Zimpfer felt his Chicago training kick into gear. "A case like this is a high-risk undertaking," he says. "You're not relying on domain knowledge – it's conceptual knowledge." Zimpfer says the conceptual framework he gained at Chicago Booth is not just an approach to business but is also pertinent to medicine: thinking along a timeline, doing risk calculations – and engaging that Chicago mode of relentless inquiry.

It was this now-instinctive framework that made him think, there's something there, you have to find it. "People who design a poisoning don't want others to detect it," Zimpfer points out. Dioxin is a poison that is usually inhaled, but Yushchenko had ingested it. "So everything looked different," says Zimpfer, "and the initial tests weren't locating the problem. If you do proper tests, it's detectable, but the forensic people didn't look for it, so all the tests were negative."

He reached out to international colleagues in Europe and across the Atlantic. They developed a war-room strategy, like a Gantt diagram, going over what had been done, what needed to be done, and what may have been forgotten. "We kept asking, 'What can we do to improve the process? Have we missed anything?' And then all of a sudden, there was success."

With a correct diagnosis, Yushchenko eventually recovered and went on to become president.

Meanwhile, Zimpfer continues as professor and chairman of his department in Vienna and is now serving at several medical associations as well.

"My heart truly beats for Chicago," he says. "It changes your entire way of thinking." He adds that his class has had an outstanding coherence, gathering every year for a reunion. (And he mentions that Yushchenko's wife, First Lady Kateryna Yushchenko, is also a Chicago Booth grad.)

And one final, fringe benefit of the program – but one that has been very important for Zimpfer: the way the professors teach. "I'm an academic myself," he says, "and I got so much from Chicago's teaching methodology." He borrows from it as much as he can to help his students learn to solve medical mysteries, as he has. "I am always asking them questions," he says, "not simply doing a frontal approach and throwing stuff at them. Instead I say to them, 'Forget the text. Do you think this can be true?'"



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