Dear Rector  
Dear colleagues,  
Dear Jordi,

According to the Codex of the Belgian Universities, honorary degrees can be awarded based on outstanding scientific contributions OR societal merit. Professor Sunyer’s work certainly ticks all the right boxes.

Dear Jordi: if I’m not mistaken, you started your university education in the same year General Franco died (in 1975). The end of the Franco regime and the start of your life as a college student must have opened an entirely new world for you.

Being trained as a clinician in the mid-seventies, it is rather surprising that you’ve always preferred to focus on *preventing* diseases rather than *treating* them. Even more: you’ve always been dedicated in linking good health and a healthy environment. Your scientific work took off with a case of an alarming asthma cluster in Barcelona in the eighties. After finishing your work in the local hospital, you devoted your time to researching the origins of this unprecedented asthma peak. You produced city maps showing how a cluster occurs near the harbour. And four years later, you proved there was a causal link between asthma hospitalisation and the unloading of soybeans in Barcelona’s port.

If I had to summarise the focus of your research over the past three decades in just one sentence, it would be this: preventing people from getting sick in the first place – and securing and promoting the optimal development of the next generation through a healthy living environment.

The great merit of your research lies in its longitudinal nature. You spent the past 25 years demonstrating the importance of prenatal exposures as a sensitive period of life. Making the world a safer place for ourselves and our children should be the highest human instinct. In doing so, you showed that the choices we make today have consequences for the health of future generations.

Jordi: you are the founder of the INMA and BiSC birth cohorts. Your institute was a driving force behind harmonising such studies all over Europe. More than twenty years ago, most studies did not consider early-life exposure to unhealthy environments. That’s remarkable, given that early-life is the most sensitive period in the life of a human being. So, besides the paradigm of Paracelsus that the dose makes the toxin, you added a novel paradigm – the timing of the exposure is an important determinant of the toxicity..

As your career progressed, you moved from lung to brain. With your ERC Advanced Grant ‘BREATHE’, you have demonstrated the importance of good air quality and access to green space to children’s cognitive development but also of the link between air pollution and the risk of dementia in adulthood.

Dear guests, dear colleagues,

As the Rector mentioned in his introduction, Jordi Sunyer inhibits a strong civic engagement. Look, for example, how he translates his work to other disciplines like sustainable urban planning. Good urban planning is essential in promoting population health through reduction of noise exposure, improving air quality, climate resilience and infrastructure that encourages exercise.

Deprived places get better places to live

I don’t think there are many clinicians who consider spatial planners as key players in improving people’s health…

The evidence-based scientific insights gained by Jordi’s team have been translated into policies in a wide range of European cities.

This green revolution in urban planning is not an isolated topic anymore, drawing the attention of just a handful of policymakers. In many different cities, it has become the consensus in the political arena. This thanks to solid scientific evidence.

Jordi Sunyer has been on the Clarivate list of ‘Highly Cited Researchers’ for several years now. He published over 700 scientific articles – that have been cited more than 90,000 times. His scientific findings have been translated into recommendations for the World Health Organisation, the United Nations International Panel on Chemical Safety, and governmental committees worldwide. And: he also provided personal support to people fighting for a basic right, the right to clean air.

As you can see: Jordi Sunyer’s academic and societal footprint is impressive.

Dear Jordi: to underscore everything that I’ve been saying here, I asked some international peers to say a few words. Let’s have a listen.

The only thing I can add: because of your outstanding scientific and societal contributions, I’m pleased to nominate you, Professor Jordi Sunyer, honorary doctor.

Congratulations!

Prof. dr. Tim Nawrot

Faculty of Science