

Alain Robert – President of the Foundation Board, Helmut Horten Foundation



We invest in people and in outcomes, but always with the purpose of improving patients' lives.

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Founded in 1971, the Helmut Horten Foundation has steadily evolved from a discreet philanthropic entity into a pivotal force within Switzerland's medical research landscape. Today, under the leadership of Alain Robert, the Foundation is navigating a strategic transformation, channelling expanded resources into precision oncology, immunology, and emerging priorities like mental health. With a clear focus on translational impact and a commitment to long-term partnerships, it operates at the intersection of scientific ambition and patient need, where measurable outcomes matter more than visibility.

When was the Helmut Horten Foundation established, and how has its mission been shaped over the years?

The Helmut Horten Foundation was founded in 1971 by Mr Helmut Horten, who was then based in Ticino, southern Switzerland. As a Swiss philanthropic entity, it has always operated under a rigorous legal framework that not only mandates official registration but also holds the Foundation Board accountable for ensuring that its governance, objectives, and financial stewardship remain aligned with its stated purpose.

Following Mr Horten's passing in 1987, his widow became deeply involved in advancing the Foundation's work and remained a key figure until her death in 2022. Since then, we have continued to pursue the founder's original ambitions, while interpreting them through a contemporary lens and within a governance structure that reflects the times in which we now operate.

From its inception, the Foundation has been singularly focused on medicine, guided by Mr Horten's clear directive to support patients in living better and potentially longer lives. His early philanthropic contributions spanned both infrastructure support for hospitals and investments in medical research, with the aim of enabling new therapies and treatment pathways. While the world has evolved considerably since the Foundation's early years, our core commitment remains unchanged: to honour the founder's intent by supporting initiatives that meaningfully advance patient care within today's dynamic medical landscape.

How does the Foundation define its strategic priorities today, and in what ways have recent developments influenced its areas of focus?

While the Foundation is fortunate to have the freedom to choose its areas of engagement, that freedom comes with a clear responsibility: to ensure that the resources entrusted to us are directed toward initiatives that deliver measurable, meaningful outcomes for patients. Every funding decision is guided by two essential principles: strategic clarity and accountability. We ask ourselves whether the initiative aligns with our mission and whether its results can be assessed in a transparent, patient-focused way. Unlike commercial investors, our returns are not financial; they are defined by the improvements we help bring to people's lives. We are willing to take significant risks, so long as there is a credible path to tangible patient benefit.

The scope of the healthcare field is immense, which is why we approach our work with both focus and continuity. We honour the Foundation's legacy, particularly in Ticino, where our founder lived and wished the Foundation to maintain a lasting presence. At the same time, we have built longstanding partnerships with Switzerland's leading academic and research institutions, most notably in Zurich, with ETH Zurich, the University of Zurich, and the University Hospital Zurich. Among the initiatives we are proud to support is The LOOP Zurich, the country's first integrated data platform for translational research, developed in close collaboration with those institutions and launched with our support as anchor funder.

In the years since the passing of our founder's widow in 2022, the Foundation's resources have grown significantly, prompting a reassessment of our strategic scope. Rather than funding areas already well supported, we aim to identify domains where our contribution can be catalytic, where gaps in funding persist, and where our involvement can shift the trajectory of research or care. Today, our focus is concentrated on immunology and oncology within the field of precision medicine, two areas where we have established networks, built experience, and where Switzerland's research ecosystem offers exceptional potential for impact.

What is the current scope of the Helmut Horten Foundation's work, and how do you define its position within the Swiss ecosystem?

The Helmut Horten Foundation today sees itself as a committed and increasingly prominent philanthropic partner in Switzerland. While our footprint remains focused, our ambition is to be recognised for the quality and impact of our contributions. We direct our resources toward partners

with the capabilities and vision to deliver measurable results, always guided by where our involvement can enable progress that might not otherwise occur.

True to our founder's intent, we focus on projects with defined time horizons, ideally those that can demonstrate milestones within three to seven years. This approach ensures that our efforts remain closely tied to patient benefit and avoid drifting into the abstract or overly long-term. Our role is to act where we can accelerate meaningful outcomes, not simply to add to existing streams of support.

Although our activities are concentrated in Switzerland, particularly in Ticino, we are open to global expertise that enhances domestic efforts. Our advisory board includes members based abroad, reflecting a willingness to learn from international perspectives. Nonetheless, the Foundation's mission remains firmly rooted in strengthening Switzerland's healthcare and research landscape, where we believe our impact can be most direct and lasting.

Which initiatives best illustrate the Foundation's legacy and its evolving approach to biomedical research?

Two initiatives stand out as defining examples of the Foundation's long-term contribution to Swiss medical research. One dates back to our earliest years: the establishment of what is now the Instituto Cardiocentro Ticino, reflecting our early commitment to supporting scientific infrastructure in the region. The second is the Institute for Research in Biomedicine (IRB) in Bellinzona, an immunology-focused institution launched in the early 2000s. We have served as its anchor partner throughout its development, and we believe IRB's current standing would not have been possible without the Foundation's sustained support.

Beyond these, we are increasingly involved in consortial projects, multi-institutional collaborations that reflect the growing complexity of biomedical research and the need to integrate diverse fields of expertise. These projects, many of which have been launched over the past three years, are designed to build collective capacity and foster innovation across disciplines. While some are still in their early phases and less easily captured in summary, they represent a deliberate evolution in our approach, one that remains rooted in impact, while embracing the collaborative models needed to meet today's scientific and clinical challenges.

What informs your choice of institutional and individual partners, and how do you evaluate the translational potential of the projects you support?

Our partnerships are carefully curated and primarily centred around Switzerland's most respected academic and research institutions; ETH Zurich, leading universities, and centres of excellence such as IRB. We are not structured to fund widely or indiscriminately; instead, we work with a focused group of institutions capable of delivering high-quality, patient-relevant outcomes. Alongside these institutional collaborations, we also provide targeted support each year to a number of promising young investigators, helping them establish their research credentials at a formative stage in their careers.

What defines all of our funding decisions is a strong emphasis on translational potential. We are not interested in theoretical research detached from clinical application; we support projects that can move meaningfully from laboratory to patient benefit within a realistic timeframe. Scientific ambition must be matched by feasibility and clarity of purpose, and each project must keep the patient firmly

in view.

Just as critical as the idea itself is the calibre and commitment of those leading it. We actively seek out researchers who are deeply engaged, not simply adding a project to an already full agenda, but bringing focused energy, time, and alignment to a shared goal. We are investing not only in outcomes but in individuals, scientists who see our Foundation not just as a funder, but as a long-term partner in achieving something greater. Ultimately, what matters is that the work we support contributes meaningfully to improving patients' lives, and that requires both scientific excellence and genuine human dedication.

How do you view the current state of philanthropic engagement in Swiss medical research, and what trends are shaping its future?

Switzerland's philanthropic ecosystem is both mature and diverse, comprising foundations that vary widely in size, focus, and approach. Some operate with tightly defined mandates, while others are more open to collaboration, recognising that strategic partnerships often offer the only path to achieving outcomes that would be unattainable in isolation.

This is especially true in the field of medical research, where increasing complexity has made interdisciplinary cooperation not only valuable but essential. Smaller foundations, in particular, have come to rely on collective frameworks to align objectives, share resources, and jointly support high-impact initiatives.

At the same time, we are witnessing a broader professionalisation across the sector. Foundation boards are becoming more engaged, bringing a higher level of strategic oversight and a greater willingness to seek synergies across institutional lines. This shift has strengthened confidence in how philanthropic funds are deployed, ensuring that support is not only coordinated and purposeful, but also aligned with core values and measurable outcomes. In this context, the role of philanthropy in advancing healthcare and research in Switzerland is both growing and evolving in promising ways.

How has Switzerland's research ecosystem influenced the Foundation's ability to create impact?

Switzerland offers a highly privileged setting for advancing medical research, marked by a strong concentration of academic excellence, institutional diversity, and proximity to a globally leading pharmaceutical industry. This combination creates an ecosystem particularly well-suited to connecting research with real-world application, an advantage that has shaped the Foundation's strategy in meaningful ways.

While the country's research capabilities are unquestionably strong, the real challenge often lies in translating that scientific potential into concrete outcomes for patients. This is where we believe philanthropy has a vital role to play. There remains a structural gap between discovery and implementation, and foundations like ours are uniquely positioned to help close it, by supporting translational efforts that might otherwise struggle to find sustained backing.

Being based in Switzerland has not only offered access to exceptional talent and infrastructure, but also a responsibility: to contribute to unlocking the full value of this ecosystem. Through targeted, patient-oriented investment, we aim to accelerate the path from promising research to clinical relevance, ensuring that scientific excellence is matched by real-world impact.

What strategic directions will shape the Foundation's work over the coming years, and is there a final thought you would like to share with our international audience?

The Foundation is currently in a pivotal phase of strategic redefinition, following a liquidity event two years ago that expanded our capacity to act with greater scope and intent. As part of this evolution, we have made a clear commitment to focusing on immunology and oncology, with particular emphasis on precision medicine. These two fields – once considered distinct – are increasingly converging, especially within oncology, and we remain open to how future scientific developments may reshape the landscape and inform our next steps.

At the same time, we are actively exploring the field of mental health, recognising it as a growing societal concern across both younger and ageing populations. This exploration is still at an early stage, but we are carefully considering whether to support standalone initiatives or to play a more structural role in helping Switzerland develop centres of excellence dedicated to mental health research and care. The widening gap between patient needs and systemic capabilities makes this a particularly compelling area for long-term engagement.

Looking ahead, we feel genuinely privileged to be operating at the intersection of philanthropy and medical progress. To support individuals in regaining or managing their health is a profound responsibility, and we are fortunate to be surrounded by a research ecosystem with extraordinary potential.

Finally, in Ticino, we are deepening our efforts to strengthen translational capacity. This is an exciting and meaningful time to lead a foundation of our scale, particularly in a country like Switzerland, where the opportunity to translate scientific excellence into tangible benefit for patients is not only possible, but essential.

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