

THE STUDENT'S VOICE

## An Interview of SNO Chairman Stefan de Greef



Stefan de Greef is a fourth-year medical student at Maastricht University, The Netherlands. At the most recent Network conference in Londrina, Stefan was elected Chair of the Student Network Organisation. This interview took place in Maastricht in January 2002. It was conducted in Dutch and then edited, abridged and translated in English.

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*Since 1995 you have been a medical student in Maastricht. Before that, you studied law. Can you explain your career path?*

I didn't have a free choice. I have always wanted to study medicine, but in the Dutch system you have to participate in a lottery that decides whether you can enrol in medicine. I had the bad luck of being excluded from medicine for four consecutive years. In that period I finished law school. In an attempt to make up for some of that time, I have combined the second and third year of medicine.

*In medical school you are also active in several administrative bodies. What prompted that?*

That was mainly prompted by what I experienced in the tutorial groups in the first year. It may also be because I have done law school before, that I felt that the group work could have been more structured and productive and that some of the tutors could have shown more motivation. So I decided to try to do

something about that, and I joined the educational board. Two of the eight members of this board are students. I felt that being on this board might give me a reasonable way to influence decisions about education.

*What was it like to collaborate with the staff in that group?*

Very good! The positive aspects were that the students were well accepted on the board. We were truly listened to. For the board, it is good to have the students represented. We provide more inspiration, fresh thinking, and new energy. As students we have a certain “charm”: we can walk in just about everywhere and people tell us their views.

A negative point was that as a faculty structure, the board is like a mammoth tanker. It moves only very slowly. And it is very difficult to elicit the views of all the students we represent. We issued monthly e-mail messages and questions, but we are not sure how well these were read.

My present involvement is in the curriculum reform that is taking place in the medical faculty at Maastricht. I work in a group that designs the new exam system.

*As a student designing the exam system, isn't it tempting to make the rules more lenient?*

Not so much. We have the confidence of the staff, and we have to do a good job. Also, the students aren't criticising the pass–fail decision. They are criticising the way that decision is reached. The validity, the relevance, and the timing of certain tests are the issues we are trying to improve.

*How do you feel, as a consumer, about the problem-based educational system?*

For me it works well. I can motivate myself, and I let myself be motivated by the group. But in tutorial groups I notice that there are also more dependent students for whom the approach is more difficult. For those students, the success of the approach depends more on the quality of the tutor.

*You also experienced problem-based learning at the law school. What was the biggest difference between PBL at the law school and PBL at the medical school?*

The tests. At the law school there were tests that only 10–15% of the students passed. We worked very hard for those, because we wanted to pass them. However, after such a period of intense work you could easily forget what you had learned because you would not need much of it again. You cannot prepare yourself for the tests in the medical faculty, because they measure everything you have learned until then. I prefer to study steadily and occasionally find out how far you still have to go. I find that the assessment system in the medical school is better for that way of working.

*In October 2001 you were elected Chair of the Student Network Organisation. What are your plans?*

To be honest, this was the first Network conference that I attended. Before that I knew very little about The Network. However, during the conference I became inspired by the exchange of experiences amongst the students as well as between the students and the staff. I think that the SNO should continue to provide a forum for students to exchange ideas. It can serve as a Network in itself, assisting students who are trying out alternative approaches and providing support for students in local organisational positions. We can also help to provide students with exchange programmes.

The fact that I am from Maastricht may help. We *have* student representation in the administration. We *have* problem-based learning. We *have* a skillslab where we can even learn the intimate details of the genital examination. We *have* assessment of professional behaviour. I am not in the SNO as a representative of Maastricht, but I am from this school where some of the new ideas have been realised.

The students in the SNO are the future leaders of the improvement of health care and health care education. It is necessary to provide a bond between these future leaders in order to create some continuity and mutual support. It is therefore my plan to allow as many students as possible into Network conferences. Every institution should send at least one student representative! This student will be of benefit to his or her institution by assisting the staff and generating new ideas for improvement of the education.

I do understand that it is not easy to align all differences in a global organisation without personal contact. We need to find good ways of maintaining contact between each other between conferences.

In that way I hope we can continue to provide a forum for the students' voices in The Network. I'll do my best to assist in that process.