

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Jacobus M. Greep, 1929–2004

I think that I met him for the first time in an elevator. Jacobus “Co” Greep was at that time professor and chair of the Department of Surgery at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. We were on our way to a welcome reception for an External Review Committee visiting Maastricht to assess the quality of its problem-based curriculum. I was smoking a cigarette.

“Whenever we cut open a smoker in the operating theater, his lungs turn out to be entirely black of tar,” he said to me, looking at my cigarette. A couple of days later I quitted smoking.

A second example of his unusual skill to persuade people I observed a few years later. It must have been around 1983. We were in Havana for a conference organized by the Network of Community-oriented Educational Institutions for Health Sciences (now The Network: Towards Unity for Health), in collaboration with the Cuban Ministry of Health. Co Greep was the Network’s Secretary General, and I was one of his assistants. As part of the conference, we attended one of those five-hour speeches by Fidel Castro, head of state of Cuba then and now. The speech was given in the huge Convention Centre of the capital and security was dense because of an alleged attempt by the CIA to kill Castro a few years earlier. After the speech there was a reception and despite the heightened security Co Greep got himself introduced to “El Lider”. While drinking a “Cuba Libre” together, Co complimented Fidel Castro with the accomplishments of the regime in the area of health care. Although Cuba was in many respects a third-world country, patients from Eastern-European communist countries would fly in to enjoy high-level tertiary care in Havana. However, Co also voiced some criticism. Primary care facilities were virtually nonexistent in Cuba and this was, in his view, a serious shortcoming. “What do you mean by primary care facilities?” said Fidel, and Co began to lecture him about the virtues of the Dutch family doctor as the goalkeeper of the health care system, dealing with 90% of the health problems of the population.

Four years later, we were back in Havana for a similar conference and toured the city to visit health care facilities. As it turned out, Cuba had built family doctors’ offices at almost every 5th street corner of the city, and the doctors working there were responsible for all primary health needs of people living in the neighbourhood. All afternoon, Co walked around, a big smile on his face.

Yes, Co could be quite persuasive, and used this skill with great effect as Secretary General of The Network. When he came into office in the beginning of the 1980s, it was a small organization of 20 medical schools dedicated to the idea of making health professions education more relevant to the needs of the population. When he left office, in 1987, The Network had grown to consist of more than a hundred member schools. The organization initially had some support of the World Health Organization but its means were so limited that it could barely survive. Co ensured adequate funding of the organization's Secretariat, provided by Maastricht medical school. This arrangement has proven so well-entrenched that it still exists, 25 years later. As an educational innovator, Co Greep proved to be particularly successful in the Eastern-Mediterranean region and on the Arab peninsula. Several new schools, notably in the United Arab Emirates and in Egypt, initially solicited his help with the development of their curricula and are now educational leaders in their own right. The medical school of Suez Canal University in Ismailia, Egypt, has conferred upon Co Greep an honorary degree for his crucial role in the establishment of its community-oriented and problem-based curriculum.

On the home front he was equally influential. He was involved in the development of Maastricht University from its very beginning in 1974 and is considered one of its founding fathers. In 1978 he became dean of the medical school. His relentless support for the educational innovation pursued by his school has highly contributed to its national acceptance and later international fame. Yet his greatest success is considered to be his turnaround of the regional and conservative St. Annadal Hospital in Maastricht into a truly academic hospital. This process was crowned with the establishment of a new 900-bed hospital that serves the whole Limburg province and part of the Belgian hinterland. Yet this triumph also invoked criticism because some believed that Limburg province would have profited more from the reinforcement by the medical school of the existing regional hospitals and the strengthening of primary care in the region. The university nevertheless appreciated his great merit by presenting him with the Tanspenning (a university award) in 1986. He also received a royal distinction.

We will sorely miss Jacobus Greep. Not only because he was such a talented innovator. Not only because he had that imposing personality that made his "Co"-workers work their heart out to help him accomplish his goals. Not only because he took himself very seriously (which he did). But also because he was a man full of self-deprecating humour, witty, light-hearted, and caring for those around him.

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