

## **Henk Menke “from dermatology to society”**

### **Education**

It is not easy to explain why I studied medicine, but I have certainly been influenced by my godfather, uncle Chris, my mother's brother. He was a Medical Doctor in Suriname. As a boy I secretly passed many hours in his library, peeping into textbooks, gazing at medical illustrations that were beyond a child's imagination. My interest was awakened. But my drive to study and publish also came from my father, a high school math teacher who wrote the first Surinamese book on elementary mathematics. Summer 1960, at the age of 17, after having finished secondary school in Suriname, I travelled to the Netherlands to study medicine at the oldest Dutch University in the historical city of Leiden.

My inclination towards understanding social problems was strongly stimulated while studying in Leiden. I was influenced by colleague Surinamese students. We adhered to the so called student responsibility movement and consequently often discussed political, social and cultural items, sometimes with West Indian students visiting us from Paris and London, the common ethnic and historical roots being the ties that bound us together.

Interested in the great plagues that chastised mankind from historical times up to the present, with a fascination for leprosy and syphilis, I specialized in dermatology and defended in 1975 a thesis about syphilis. But by choosing this discipline I passed over psychiatry, my other great passion; I had the feeling that studying human normal and diseased mind could open the gate to understanding behavior. In those days I was not yet particularly interested in biological or sociological problems related to skin pigmentation, although - having a skin of color myself - I was aware of the burden of racial discrimination. While specializing, with professor Chris Beek teaching me the principles of dermatology and medical philosophy, it became clear to me that possibilities to cure in my field of specialty were limited. To compensate this disappointing shortcoming, I searched for opportunities to make a contribution to society in addition to my efforts to ease suffering of patients. I found the answer in doing medical research in collaboration with university centers and by joining the board of nongovernmental organizations directed towards medicine and society.

### **Professional life**

I have worked as a young dermatologist in my home country Suriname from 1975 till 1978 in the euphoric period following independence after 300 years of Dutch colonization. There I joined Paul Niemel, the passionate grand old man of Surinamese dermatology, with his epidemiological approach. During our exciting fieldwork in rural areas we discovered the so-called attenuated yaws, a particular type of this non-venereal treponemal disease. Furthermore I formulated my view on STD in Suriname including prostitution as “social vehicle” of (international) disease transmission. Meanwhile my knowledge of tropical dermatology, including leprosy and the special problems of the dark skin, grew day by day.

I remigrated to the Netherlands, shortly before the Military in 1980 overthrew the young fragile democracy in Suriname, establishing a repressive autocracy. I joined my friend Ernst Stolz, the new professor of dermatology in Rotterdam in his STD research, but a memorable scientific meeting at the University of Groningen (Netherlands) soon threw me back into the world of the stigmatized. A patient, born in Suriname, with a nodular type of xanthomatosis was presented; I objected and proposed lepromatous leprosy as the right diagnosis. My suggestion was jeered and

rejected standing the meeting. But a few days later professor Klokke, head of the department called me, admitting that I was right. Obviously impressed he invited me to become staff member at his department. I declined, but on his proposal I joined in 1981 the executive committee of Bethesda, a foundation dedicated to leprosy patients in Suriname. As chairman (from 1997 till 2008) I reorganized and modernized Bethesda. In 2001 I organized, together with others, a Dutch - Surinamese meeting on leprosy in Suriname, mapping clinical and epidemiological but also cultural, social and historic aspects of the leprosy problem. In 2008 I resigned from Bethesda, but what remained was my passion for leprosy, now more particularly the history of this curse. With Toine Pieters (medical historian) and William Faber (leprologist), I focused on leprosy history, and constructed the concept of “Dutch West Indian leprosy contagionism”.

Meanwhile, as staff member (from 1979 till 2002) at the “Sint Franciscus Gasthuis”, a prestigious general hospital in Rotterdam, I sank my teeth into the subject of ethnic dermatology, building up experience in this underdeveloped field. In the eighties and nineties of last century I probably had the largest practice of ethnic dermatology in the Netherlands. I learned that pigment and pigmentary disorders are of existential significance for people of colour. I called attention of the Dutch dermatologists to the consequences of the changing Dutch demographics for their practice, with around the millennium 10% of the population in the Netherlands having a dark skin and in the big cities even mounting to 50%. I pleaded for research and training in ethnic dermatology. Furthermore I contributed in shaping this sub-discipline in the Netherlands, being the first to describe clinical entities hitherto lacking in Dutch medical literature: exogenous ochronosis, a consequence of bleaching the skin with hydroquinone and a subtype of amyloidosis, a group of skin diseases of in fact unknown origin. (refences). In 1984 I recognized a hitherto unknown type of hypopigmentation, a finding that was supported by Wiete Westerhof expert in pigmentation disorders at the University of Amsterdam, who discovered its cause. Our common interest in this new entity was the starting point of our friendship and collaboration in the wide field of pigmentation the years ahead. I supported Wiete in founding the Dutch Institute of Pigmentary disorders and was chairman of the foundation governing this Institute from 1994 till 1999. In 1997 Wiete, my brother Jack and I established Color foundation, underscoring the widening of my originally dermatological oriented scope on pigmentation towards a more society oriented view.

**List of publications and awards (see separate page)**