Prof. Dr. J. R. Prakken on his 70th birthday

Jan Roelof Prakken, born on 1st July 1897, was educated in Amsterdam, where he also studied medicine. During this period he was for some time an assistant in the physiological laboratory. He finished his medical studies in January 1923 and started a practice as general practitioner at Leerdam, where he married Annie Bukers. They have two daughters, who are now both married and have children themselves. After two years he left Leerdam and started a practice at Den Burg, on the isle of Texel, where he felt more at home than in Leerdam and where he has been a beloved family doctor for many years.

On Texel, “the isle of sheep”, as it is called, his interest in dermatology awakened, and it is no wonder that his first dermatological publication on ecthyma contagiosa ovina dates from this time. His patients often said: “Our doctor will be a professor soon, for he is always reading when he has to wait during a confinement.” However it was not dermatological papers that he read but detective stories, still a hobby of his.

In 1931 he left Texel and he became a resident physician in the University Hospital of Dermatology and Venereology at Amsterdam under the late Prof. Dr. W. L. L. Carol. In 1933 he began to practise as a dermatologist in Amsterdam, while at the same time he became a member of the scientific staff of the Department of Dermatology.

Prakken has always been, and still is, much interested in histo-pathology of the skin; also, from the beginning of his dermatological career he clearly saw the close relationship between the skin and the other organs. This becomes evident when we consider his early dermatological publications; his thesis in 1932 had as title: “Contribution to the knowledge of the cysts of the skin” and his inaugural speech when he was appointed as professor of dermatology and venereology at the University of Amsterdam in 1946 had as its subject: “Functional disturbances in diseases of the skin.” In the preceding years (1934, 1935 and 1936) he had worked and published on the “so-called chloride deficiency in urine in diseases of the skin” and on “excretion of chloride through the skin in pemphigus”.

Prakken has many character traits which make him very suitable for his work as a professor: honesty and reliability, amiability and tolerance, a critical mind, ability in organizing and teaching, a gift for writing and (last but not least) an interest in and knowledge of very divergent fields of dermatology and of medicine in general.

If we try to sketch the most salient traits of Prakken’s character, we have to say that he is a man of great poise, who never gets excited in public. During the many years we have worked with him a harsh word has never been spoken. That is certainly not our merit!

He is not the prototype of the “keep smiling” face; he is obviously shy to the extent of seeming almost being awkward. He hates impractical ideas and persons who do not act in accordance with their words. He even shows a lack of understanding of those people, because these qualities are alien to his nature.
His reliability makes it pleasant to cooperate with him. He dislikes any kind of show, any submissiveness and false etiquette. Every inch a democrat, he cannot feel at ease in circles where certain rigid rules are enforced.

He does not like to interfere in the private lives of his students and residents. This attitude has its disadvantages. A young resident, who expects guidance, will never get it unasked. When he has taken on some task or another, his professor will never curb him. Thus the research worker might develop rightly or wrongly. As a result many an investigation has never been finished and weak students may get permanently stuck halfway.

Perhaps Prakken does not have a good eye for it. He has a keen sense of duty and it is difficult for him to identify himself with a personality in which duty plays a subordinate role. Moreover, he is the epitome of Dutch matter-of-factness, combined with a good deal of patience and tolerance, by which many of his pupils are stimulated. He will never compel anybody to move in a direction he does not want and he will perhaps compel some people too little to take a direction he does want. For compulsion is something that he cannot exercise.

Prakken is very interested in social medicine. He has written many papers on socio-medical problems, industrial dermatology, social insurance, etc. For many years he has been a member of the Council for Public Health in our country. He is consultant dermatologist to the medical service of the Dutch Military Forces. His idea to institute a so-called night department (dormitorium) in his clinic, which was inaugurated in 1966 and which is probably the first in Europe, is another token of his social-minded attitude. In this department the patients are treated only during the night and go to work during the day.

Prakken was the first on the Continent to give psychosomatic medicine its place in dermatology by appointing a psychiatrist as a member of the scientific staff. In the fields of allergy, biochemistry, bacteriology, mycology, radiology and psychosomatic medicine Prakken stimulated many investigations in his department, and he is also very interested in venereology. He has published many papers on syphilis, gonorrhea and the fight against venereal diseases.

His organizing talent is evident from the well-thought-out plans for the rebuilding of his clinic – rebuilding was finished in 1965 – as well as from his membership of many committees. He was, for instance, for many years secretary and later chairman of the Dutch Association of Dermatologists, of which he now is an honorary member. Proof of his organizing talent combined with his love for editorial work and writing of scientific papers is also his successful editorship of the Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde, a position which gives him much joy and which we hope he will continue for many years.

His merits were officially acknowledged in 1957 when he was made a Knight of the Order of the Nederlandsche Leeuw. Prakken is very modest and averse to any cult of personality. Although he did not specialize in one field of dermatology – by which one becomes more easily known internationally – he is much appreciated abroad. This is evident from the readiness of his colleagues in many countries to cooperate in this anniversary issue and from his honorary membership of the British and Danish Association of Dermatology; he is also an affiliated member of the Royal Society of
Medicine and a corresponding member of the American Dermatological Association, the
Belgische Dermatologen Vereniging, the Société Française de Dermatologie et Syphiligraphie,
the Finnish Dermatological Society, the Societas Dermatologica Israelica and the Societas
Dermatologica Svecica.
In the Dutch medical world he is valued not only because of his scientific work and his
citorship of the Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde, but also because of his great
assistance in the education of doctors and medical students. For many years he has worked hard
to improve the training methods for general practitioners; moreover, he has written two excellent
textbooks in Dutch: in 1948 the first edition of his Textbook of Venereal Diseases was published,
and the first edition of his Textbook of Practical Dermatology appeared in 1963. Of both
textbooks further impressions have already been published.
The fact that he was able to compile these two textbooks apart from his daily work is proof of his
great energy.
We are very grateful for the cooperation we have received from the contributors to this issue and
from the editors and publishers of Dermatologica.
All his friends wish Prakken and his wife, who has always helped him in every way, on the
occasion of his 70th anniversary that they will spend many years together in good health and that
Prakken will continue to work actively in the field of general medicine and in particular in the
field of dermato-venereology.
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