

In memoriam Prof. Frits Grewel 1898–1973

Frits Grewel was born in Amsterdam on November 19th 1898 and died after a short illness on October 9th 1973. He will be remembered in years to come chiefly for his outstanding work as a neuropsychologist and his research into the mechanisms underlying developmental language and learning difficulties, though he made notable contributions to knowledge in many other fields. Frits came from an artisan but far from ordinary family. His father was renowned for his exceptional skill as a diamond cutter. His mother was a Jew, widely read and cultured. Both parents were interested in politics and were ‘anarchists’ or at least socialists. Frits was of similar persuasion and this formed the basis of his deep humanity and utter dedication to his work and patients.

Prof. Frits Grewel 1898-1973

83

As a young man he wanted to be an artist but had no particular ability. He regarded himself always as a ‘peintre manqué’. Instead he studied medicine at Amsterdam University and the Wilhelmina Gasthuis Medical School. He ‘bungled’ his first examinations and took a year off to study anthropology, sociology and criminology and maintained that this was the most profitable year of his life when later he sympathised with the protest movements among students in the 1960s.

After qualifying as a doctor in 1925 he specialised in psychiatry and neurology. He became the leader of the psychological department in the Department of Psychiatry at the Wilhelmina Gasthuis and later a reader in psychiatry at Amsterdam University. He had a profound love of children and compassion for the handicapped. In 1930, he established the first non-fee-paying polikliniek of child psychiatry in Holland. After the war, he specialised increasingly in assessment, diagnosis and education of children with neurological disorders and learning difficulties. His work came to fruition ultimately in 1964 when he was appointed to a newly created Chair in Ortho-pedagogy (remedial education) in Amsterdam University and the Head of an Institute of Orthopedagogy.

Frits was a prolific writer of scientific articles and published not only in Dutch but French, German and English in a multitude of important journals. He was a voracious reader and had a prodigious memory, besides capacity for work. This was all the more remarkable since he suffered from almost chronic ill health and survived a number of serious diseases. He turned his bad times to good advantage and always stressed the fact that, had he been a more healthy man, he would have read and studied far less and become much less learned.

He was a born teacher and every new discovery which excited him was soon written up and published for all to share. He also lectured extensively, and long before he became a professor he conducted courses for psychologists, speech therapists, teachers of the deaf and remedial teachers and assisted in their examinations, always anxious to raise the standard of training. He strove to open the eyes of teachers to the deep and underlying causes of the symptoms they observed in their pupils’ performances, and preached that without exact diagnosis there could be

no really effective remedial teaching. He was for many years on the editorial staff of the Dutch journal of *Logopedie en Foniatrie*, regularly contributing articles, notes and book reviews. Besides all this, he carried on an extensive psychiatric private practice in an old-fashioned way, being on call day and night and never refusing to be

84

Prof. Frits Grewel 1898-1973

called out when there was a real need. He charged absurdly low fees, lost records, forgot to send bills and generally neglected administration which he abhorred. His patients however, young and old, adored him.

To his colleagues he was not so patient and tolerant and in fact was an outspoken and fearless critic of 'dilettantism' and 'the widespread practice of focusing upon symptoms without a trace of diagnosis'. He deplored the harm this did to the children. In a period when early specialisation superseded the wider training of pre-war days, there were few who could match the high standards expected of them. Frits realised this and advocated the establishment of many more multi-disciplinary teams in Holland comprised of medical and educational specialists. In conservative and Calvinist Holland, Frits was, to say the least, an iconoclast and for many years he battled single-handed against apathy and prejudice. For this reason, he enjoyed attending international conferences where he scintillated in company of like minds. He will be remembered by all those with whom he made friends on these occasions for his charm, his gifts as a raconteur, a singer of folk songs in several languages and a linguistic facility which delighted in puns and witticisms. He attended every IALP congress without fail. He found particular pleasure and stimulation in the annual international symposia of neuropsychologists. He was in his way a modest man and was proud to work with such distinguished men as Poeck, de Rensi, Hécaen, Bay, Critchley, Milner and Teuber.

It is only possible to mention briefly here a few of his scientific publications. During the German occupation, when forbidden to carry on with his private practice, he studied the sociology of Amsterdam Jewry and their fusion with Dutch society and produced two unique papers on this topic. He also made a notable psychological study of Pick's disease published in English in 1955. As early as 1937 and 1939, he published papers on juvenile delinquency and in 1957 wrote a monograph on forensic psychology. He wrote on aphasia, linguistics, and disorders in the use of semiotic systems. A study of remarkable interest was published in 'Brain' in 1952 on acalculia. A report on Infantile Autism appeared in 1955. He wrote on cerebral palsy, stammering and cluttering, dyslexia, and multiply handicapped deaf children. In each and every publication, the emphasis was on the need for careful and thorough diagnosis and the need to discover the underlying perceptual and cognitive deficits responsible for failure to learn. The reader who looks for structured programs on specific groups with normal controls and statistical computations will be sadly disappointed. Frits Grewel relied upon painstaking clinical evaluation of each child, and because each child was different

Prof. Frits Grewel 1898-1973

85

and a law unto himself, he regarded much 'research' superficial, if not farcical.

It would be wrong if, in this brief biography of a remarkable man, the impression was given that Frits had no time for anything but work. On the contrary, he laid great store on cultural activities. He had a passion for all works of art and beauty and holidays were spent exploring the art galleries, museums, churches and cathedrals, book and antique shops of Europe. He loved France, Italy and then England. He was no dilettante but a connoisseur with a keen eye for a

bargain and was a familiar figure at Amsterdam art auctions. His beautiful house 'Italie' in Amsterdam was a veritable museum containing valuable books, curios, lace, pictures and prints. His treasure-trove painstakingly selected gave him great pleasure in his latter years and he was wont to remark how lucky he had been to live so long despite many vicissitudes and to have had most of his dearest desires fulfilled.

Margaret Greene

