

# 50 years Netherlands Journal of Medicine

## Reminiscences of three successive editors

### *Transition from Folia Medica Neerlandica to the Netherlands Journal of Medicine as a fully fledged international medical monthly journal*

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#### THE EARLY YEARS

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, most large hospitals and academic institutions were left in an impoverished condition and largely devoid of funds, proper laboratory instruments and accordingly trained research personnel. Hospitals and research facilities were out-of-date, often primitive and neglected. Nevertheless, medical research quite rapidly recovered; projects were set up and results reported at meetings.

Resourcefulness was quite remarkable, and accurate instruments were often constructed out of old spare parts. Although the local medical newspaper, the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, had almost succeeded in continuing publication throughout the war years, the influx of foreign medical journals showed a need to have the efforts of Dutch medical research workers published for a wider auditorium, possibly even in the UK or the USA.

The initiative to promote foreign contacts originally started from a small group of university teachers who had established excellent relations with colleagues in foreign countries because of their courageous attitude during the German occupation, and such friends were particularly found in the Scandinavian countries. As a result, some leading Dutch internists were invited to join the board of the old and prestigious English-language journal *Acta Medica Scandinavica* as associate members. For a number of years this was a profitable cooperative effort, and the opportunity to have one's thesis printed as supplement to the *Acta*, used by many Scandinavian students, was eagerly accepted, and not only because printing expenses in the Netherlands were often prohibitive.

Unfortunately, in the long run, Dutch physicians and medical research workers were unable to meet the very high standards imposed by their Scandinavian colleagues, and the Dutch editors were kindly requested to step down and leave

the board of the *Acta*. Understandably, this was a dramatic setback and everyone found it quite humiliating. It took some years to overcome the loss and start a new initiative.

Lindeboom, then Professor of Medicine at the Free University in Amsterdam and a well-known medical historian, started a new journal of internal medicine in 1957. Its somewhat pompous Latin title, *Folia Medica Neerlandica*, was probably chosen because of the past links with the *Acta*. But the language of publication was Dutch, the set-up remained modest, and issues appeared irregularly.<sup>1</sup> The board of the Netherlands Association of Internal Medicine (Nederlandsche Internisten Vereniging, NIV) came to the conclusion that the *Folia* should change its character and with this in mind Van Leeuwen (Binnengasthuis, Amsterdam) was asked to become the new managing editor in 1965. An editorial board was formed representing all the university hospitals and a few affiliated hospitals. Its aim was to make the *Folia* into an internationally accepted platform for clinical research from the Netherlands with English as the predominant language. It took a few years to achieve this goal. In the early days, publication of original work in English was actively solicited and when accepted rewarded with 50 free copies of the journal. However, by 1970, when Geerling succeeded Van Leeuwen, all original articles and reviews were published in the English language and both quantity and quality had satisfactorily increased. Finally, in 1973 the journal was completely issued in English and accordingly its name changed to *The Netherlands Journal of Medicine*. The publishing house succeeded in obtaining a quotation in Current Contents/Clinical Sciences. The subscription was linked to membership of the NIV, which also became responsible for the financial management.

The journal thus gradually changed into a semi-professionally run periodical issued on a monthly basis with a varied and interesting content. The cover was attractively redesigned – the well-known yellow/green one which was maintained until 1986. The technical arrangements were quite conservative and would now be regarded as slightly amateurish: the Journal shared the publishing firm – Bohn, an old family business – with the general medical journal, the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, and sometimes the finished manuscripts were brought to the printers on the back of a bicycle. Correspondence was either handwritten or typed. In the same style the editorial work remained very much a ‘labour of love’. This was partly compensated for by the social aspects. The monthly meetings of the editorial board were informal, and held at the home of the managing editor with coffee and cake. After exchanging the latest news from the various departments, the real work began with the invaluable assistance of Mrs Stijger, the one and only freelance secretary. She took care of archiving and layout, maintained daily contact with the authors and the publisher and, if necessary, corrected the English language. She played an essential role in the development of the Journal. Her salary was paid by the publisher, but all other expenses were the responsibility of the treasurer of the NIV, which was also the main financier, the number of paid subscriptions (mainly libraries) being quite low. The only other source of income was the publication of advertisements of pharmaceutical products, but this mainly covered the publisher’s deficit. Proofs were circulated by mail; publishing delays therefore tended to be rather long. Nevertheless, all these changes were appreciated by the members of the NIV and other subscribers, and there was rarely a shortage of manuscripts. The arrangement that the managing editor was also a member of the board of the NIV guaranteed a regular input. However, it has to be admitted that the rejection rate was low and standards had not yet reached an internationally acceptable level.

When Van Leeuwen handed the job of managing editor over to his successor, Geerling, in 1970 the position of the Journal was stable and the future looked bright. But the overall economic situation had worsened, and the financial resources of the Journal and its main sponsor, the NIV, were no longer as rosy as in the past. Geerling had a solid reputation as editor of the ‘Referaten’ section (Short summaries of articles from foreign medical journals, published regularly, originally as reports written for a journal club in the department of internal medicine in the Amsterdam) in the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, and he also had an excellent network in the world of Dutch internal medicine, both outside and inside university departments. Moreover, he was blessed with an almost photographic memory. Van Leeuwen’s management model – including the homely aspects and the simple methods used – was carefully maintained.

Unfortunately, the initial enthusiasm had waned because Dutch clinicians increasingly tried to have their reports published in prestigious English-language journals, which enhanced their reputation and produced a higher number of quotations. This happened at a time when funding of clinical and research departments was not so much decided by local quality or practicability, but predominantly by international quotation rates – and these in turn were decided by one single institution, the International Scientific Institute or ISI. Repeated attempts at obtaining quotation in Current Contents/Life Sciences failed in that period. Despite doubling the effort to solicit papers both input quantity and quality suffered and the number of issues had to gradually be reduced. This also meant a drop in advertising income and the increasing scrutiny of the NIV’s treasurer. Nevertheless the Journal survived the lean years to meet newer challenges and greater upheaval.

#### ANTICIPATING NEWER DEVELOPMENTS

In the present era, publishing a scientific journal without the resources of electronic media, the Internet, word processing and the use of databases would be unthinkable. But when guards changed in 1981 and Offerhaus took over from Geerling, such notions still sounded like futuristic fantasies. The only immediate change was the purchase of a voluminous file indexing system copied from the secretariat of the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*. There they were already aware of the possibilities offered by desktop computing systems, but these were still quite expensive. Mainframe systems were difficult to handle and not especially suited for this kind of work. However, by pure chance some funds were made available from one of the Dutch drug bulletins and for the hefty price of f 5000 (approx. € 2250) an Apple IIe system was purchased (figure 1), two years before the appearance of

**Figure 1.** The antediluvian ‘personal’ computer used to start computerisation of the Journal. See text for a description



the IBM PC on the European market. The Apple IIe was an impressive machine with an internal memory of 1028 kB, a clock speed of 1 MHz (!), two floppy disk drives each 320 kB and even a large box harbouring a hard disk of 20 MB; it could connect to the outside world at a maximum speed of 1.2 kB/min. But it could also write letters, maintain a simple database and consult Medline all the way to the USA. Because institutional secretarial assistance was not available, the use of a computer was a necessity.<sup>2</sup>

Although both the editors and the publisher were quite happy, many authors and referees had difficulty in adjusting to modern times. Printed standard letters, submitting texts on diskette etc. were felt to be unfriendly and impersonal. It took some time before these changes were accepted. And to his dismay, the NIV's treasurer discovered that a 'paperless' office can be quite expensive. On the other hand, publishing speed was considerably enhanced, and consequently the number of submissions increased. It became possible to fill twelve issues per year and even to raise standards and reject some substandard material.

All went smoothly until the NIV's treasury started questioning the publishing expenses and discovered that most of the income from advertising had been spirited away. The contract with the original publisher had to be cancelled and a new one found. This proved to be quite difficult. An attempt to merge with the British *Quarterly Journal of Medicine* utterly failed because their editors felt far superior to any journal from 'on the continent', even though their publisher, Blackwell's, was sympathetic. A second attempt through the German publisher Springer looked much more promising, but the proposed merger with the German internists' journal *Klinische Wochenschrift* and the Belgian *Acta Clinica Belgica* ended in total failure because our Southern neighbours refused to give up their independence – even though the Germans were willing to make concessions on a new name and abandon the German language in favour of English. In the end, in 1985 it remained up to Offerhaus's successor De Leeuw to cut off all old ties and start with a new publishing house, this time Elsevier. This proved to be an unhappy marriage and it also meant the involuntary retirement of Mrs Stijger, who had acted as the heart and soul of the enterprise for so many years. However, the transition did not harm the Journal. But it

was the beginning of a totally new era in which freelance assistants were replaced by academic office staff, mailings and postage stamps by word processing and e-mail, and coffee and cake at the managing editor's home replaced by the mobile phone. Despite entering the electronic age, the Journal survived quite well.

On 23 October 2006 there was a final meeting at the home of the second editor in the history of the Journal, Van Leeuwen – with coffee and cakes – and three successive managing editors, now well into the age of retirement, were able to look back on a substantial part of the Journal's history and had the occasion to recall some almost forgotten events which contributed to its present success (figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Three former managing editors together in 2006 (from left to right: Tontin van Leeuwen, Leo Offerhaus and Jan Geerling)



#### NOTE

Invitational article on request by the editors of the *Netherlands Journal of Medicine*.

#### REFERENCES

1. The Editors. The Netherlands Journal of Medicine on its final course. *Neth J Med* 1973;16:1-2.
2. Offerhaus L. A farewell to arms. *Neth J Med* 1985;28:535.