

Henk Lamberts

Influential academic who classified encounters in primary care

Henk Lamberts's work included coauthorship of the *International Classification of Primary Care (ICPC)* and international research into the content of general practice. He was not thrown by anything or anyone, but ill health took away first his eyesight and finally the integrity of his nervous system, leading to his untimely death at the age of 68.

Apart from being a scientist of the first order with drive and a penetrating intellect, Henk was a polymath, a lateral thinker, and fun to be with. At the annual Wonca (World Organization of Family Doctors) classification meetings, colleagues would compete to be asked to dine with him because he was entertaining and challenging, no matter what disagreements had preceded the evening meal: for Henk's formidable intellect was difficult to challenge unless one was fully and evidentially prepared. His command of the English language matched the most erudite native English speaker, and he had always read the most recent English literature as well as the academic literature relevant to his world.

Henk was born on 13 July 1940 into an influential family in Rotterdam, a month after the invasion of the Netherlands. His father was a solo general practitioner and member of the Dutch resistance who subsequently became a Labour member of parliament. Henk himself became a regional councillor in Rijnmond in 1963, two years before his graduation from the Medical School of Rotterdam, and subsequently city councillor in Rotterdam. He went on to found the Ommoord Health Centre and group practice in Rotterdam, an important and innovative centre of primary care and family practice. Here he created one of the first multidisciplinary primary care teams in Europe.

Henk left Rotterdam for the University of Amsterdam in 1984, where he remained professor and chairman for more than 10 years. Then he became a full time research professor until his retirement at age 65, in 2005. Even after his retirement he continued his work by supervising more than 20 doctoral students and also working extensively with the US National Library of Medicine to develop a website to consolidate the use of *ICPC* internationally, in more than 20 languages.

His work in community oriented primary care, which he started in Ommoord and continued in Amsterdam, required the development of a new analysis tool, a statistically valid classification

designed specifically for the clinical, behavioural, and social circumstances of family medicine and incorporating the nature of healthcare management for health in the community. This work, published in 1987 as *ICPC*, and coauthored by Maurice Wood, was the product of years of effort by a World Health Organization international working party, initially funded by the US National Center for Health Statistics. After publication, subsequent development was carried out under the aegis of Wonca, by Henk and subsequently many others. *ICPC* is translated into 22 languages, accepted by the World Health Organization as a member of the family of international classifications, widely used for the routine collection of data on episodes of care in the Netherlands, Japan, Poland, Malta, and Serbia, and also used in further studies in Australia, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Much of this work was done by Henk and his coworkers in Amsterdam and abroad, and his written legacy to the world of general practice includes three textbooks and hundreds of articles.

Although *ICPC* has never been adopted as a standard in the United Kingdom, it has been used here in several academic research projects. Additionally, Henk was a frequent visitor to meetings of the primary health care specialist group of the British Computer Society. Here his main impact was in the structure of the electronic health record and the importance of the concept of "health care episodes" in the longitudinal evolution and analysis of health conditions in primary care. Many will remember the juxtaposition of two titans of the worlds of health classification and terminology, when Henk and James Read met at a British Computer Society meeting in Gateshead in 1991.

Henk received several prestigious prizes and awards for his innovations and research in family medicine: he was honorary member of the Dutch College of General Practitioners, member of the US Institute of Medicine, recipient of the Maurice Wood

award of the North American Primary Care Research Group in 2005, and he was made honorary fellow of Wonca in 2007.

During his last two years of academic life he had increasing neuromuscular pain on activity, which increased inexorably in the three years of his retirement. Initially it was thought to be a neurological problem as a result of the use of statins, but this was revised to "a rapidly progressing picture of multiple neurological deficits probably due to a paraneoplastic syndrome, leading to respiratory failure."

However, he remained cheerful and active and continued to travel widely. In late November 2008 he visited the United States and Puerto Rico for the annual North American Primary Care Research Group meeting, where he was formally awarded fellowship



Apart from being a scientist of the first order with drive and a penetrating intellect, Henk was a polymath, a lateral thinker, and fun to be with

of Wonca. In his acceptance speech he delivered a parable in which he paid homage to the considerable academic resource his wife and research colleague, Inge Okkes, had provided during his later career. Typically this was delivered spontaneously with considerable humour, to the delight of his audience.

While at home on 23 December 2008 the neuromuscular pain and concomitant paralysis became catastrophic, affecting his respiration and requiring admission to hospital. Little relief was available and by his own wish he returned home to his family. With help, his demise was

peaceful on 29 December.

His wife provided this vignette: "Henk was, among many other things, the funniest man I ever met. In his last hour, sick and aware of impending death he made me laugh. After several years of severe allergy to flowers we never had them in our home. Among his last words to me were 'In any case, in the death notice you may safely state: Henk loved flowers.'"

Henk leaves his wife and two daughters by his first marriage to Marjo, who died in 1989.

Nick Booth, Maurice Wood, Chris van Weel
Henk Lamberts, coauthor of the *International Classification of Primary Care* (b 1940 Rotterdam; q Rotterdam 1965), died 29 December 2008 from neuromuscular paralysis, respiratory difficulty, and euthanasia.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2009;338:b1747