

## LAUDATIO PIETER DEVRIESE

*Freddy Haesebrouck*

It's a great honor and pleasure to introduce Pieter Devriese on the occasion of the presentation of the Sarton Medal awarded by the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. In the first place because it highlights the career of a clinician and researcher who took an active interest in the history of certain unusual aspects of his specialty. Secondly, because it contributes to the recognition of Emile Van Ermengem, a relatively unknown scientist who made one of the important discoveries in the field of medical bacteriology.

Pieter Devriese was born in 1938 in Kortrijk, West-Flanders. Son of a general practitioner, he followed the footsteps of his father only to obtain his medical degree. Immediately after graduation at the University of Leuven in 1964, he started specialized studies in otorhinolaryngology at the Wilhelmina Gasthuis in Amsterdam under the supervision of Professor L.B.W. Jongkees. In 1972 he obtained a Ph.D. degree at the University of Amsterdam with presentation and defense of his thesis 'Experiments on the Facial Nerve' with Jongkees as his promotor.

Ever since he has combined his interest in scientific research with clinical activity. Pieter Devriese worked in the Wilhelmina Gasthuis as well as in the Binnengasthuis. From 1978 on he has been working at the Amsterdam Academic Hospital where he was appointed university lecturer in 1978 and head of the department of facialis research and phoniatics in 1987.

Pieter Devriese has developed the greater part of his career in Amsterdam, where he settled and married. Very recently, however, he has been active in his native country as a part-time consultant at the Antwerp University Hospital.

His position in a 'foreign' country may have contributed to his interest in the history of medicine. This can be concluded from the two

topics that Pieter Devriese thoroughly investigated and on which he published. The first one concerned the sad case of the Flemish artist Rik Wouters, a splendid painter of exuberant light and colors, who died as refugee during the First World War in Amsterdam from a most painful cancer of the facial region.

The second topic that caught the attention of Pieter Devriese, again concerned his professional specialty and had to do with his native country. As a specialist in pathology of the facial nerve, he has been involved from scratch in the introduction of botulinum toxin therapy in The Netherlands as is testified by his publications on the topic from 1991 on. This unusual but highly successful therapy is based on the description by Emile Van Ermengem, at that time Professor of medical bacteriology at the University of Ghent, of the etiological agent of botulism, now over a century ago.

As a veterinary bacteriologist I am most happy to see that botulin, the cause of a dreadful condition in animals and a feared but rare cause of food poisoning in man, is now a most useful drug used in the treatment of otherwise incurable conditions in humans. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Sarton committee and myself recognize the merits of Pieter Devriese who saved from oblivion the discovery of Emile Van Ermengem, hardly known in his own country as well as at the university in which this eminent bacteriologist spent his professional life.

