

## **SARTON CHAIR LECTURES**

## LAUDATIO ROBERT VAN HEE

*Michel Thiery*

It is my privilege and pleasure to present the Sarton Memorial Medal recipient of our medical faculty, my colleague and friend Professor Robert (Bob) Van Hee. This privilege I share with another Bob, Robert Rubens, our professor of endocrinology and representative of our faculty in the Sarton Committee. It was in fact his turn to act as “collega proximus” on this occasion but wrightly or wrongly he declined the proposal, on the basis that Van Hee in his brother-in-law and that my discipline – I am a gynaecologist – is more closely related to that of our medallist. No conclusive arguments if you ask me, but I do appreciate the elegant gesture.

Robert Van Hee was born in Antwerp in 1943. Having completed his humanities there, he decided to become a physician, exchanging his home town for ours and Ghent University, where he graduated an M.D. in 1967. From the late sixties to 1975 he specialized in surgery at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, where he obtained a second doctorate with the thesis, entitled “Pancreaticoduodenal preservation and transplantation”.

On his return to Antwerp his luck star served him well. He joined the staff of the surgical department of the recently founded Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen (U.I.A.) where he was promoted Docent and, in the nineties, full Professor and Head of the department of general, endocrine, vascular, and thoracic surgery.

Professor Van Hee pioneered transplantation and endoscopic surgery in Belgium, was elected president of the Royal Belgian Society of Surgery, organized the Eurosurgery Congress and the World Congress of Surgery in Brussels, in 1992 and 2001 respectively. He is a member of the International Society for Surgery, the European Society for Surgical Research, the European Society for Organ Transplantation, and the Belgian Group for Endoscopic Surgery. So far his medical Career.

His second scientific career, which ran in parallel with the former, is devoted to the history of medicine. Bob's interest, aroused by his chief and thesis promotor Professor Daniël de Moulin, the founder and first director of

the Nijmegen Institute for the History of Medicine, was stimulated further by his wife, a professional historian who became his close and faithful associate.

What had started as a hobby became a passion, finally a second profession after Van Hee was appointed professor of medical history at his Alma Mater where he established the Nonnius Institute for the History of Medicine and the Natural Sciences in 1990. With characteristic energy and dedication he organized congresses and symposia, established the Dutch-Flemish journal "Geschiedenis der Geneeskunde" (History of Medicine) with his Leyden colleague Harm Beukers, participated in Medical-historical corporate life, established the Nonnius Vereniging voor Geschiedenis der Geneeskunde in het Verleden (Nonnius Society for History of Medicine in the Past) with his Antwerp colleague and friend Jean-Pierre Tricot, published an impressive number of articles on a wide variety of medical-historical topics, mostly related to surgery, edited books, e.g. a lavishly illustrated volume on the history of surgery in Flanders.

Our belief that George Sarton, the Father of the history of science, would have appreciated Van Hee's approach to the history of medicine was an extra motive for the Ghent faculty in proposing him as a recipient of the Sarton Memorial Medal. On behalf of our university, our faculty, the members of the Sarton Committee and its president I wish to extend our congratulations to Bob and Christiane Van Hee. We wish them all the best and a successful continuation of their endeavours.

