Carl von Ossietzky
Universität
Oldenburg

## Transcript of the interview with Professor Scherjon on 23.05.2022

I: Moin and welcome Prof. Scherjon. Thank you very much for taking the time to give us an interview today and for providing an insight into the MD/PhD programme. #00:00:10-5#

I: Before I start asking you a few **questions I would like you briefly introduce yourself**. #00:00:15-8#

Prof. Scherjon: Ok. [...] My name is Sicco Scherjon. I am an obstetrician-gynaecologist and I work for about 10 years now in Groningen in the Netherlands. I always combined my clinical work with scientific work. Originally it was in neuroscience in the UMC in Amsterdam. Later on, more immunology in Leiden and the last 10 years we did much more on programming, so DNA-changes, methylation on the DNA. So, I always combined clinical work with science and - I think that's interesting - both of my fields, the clinical work and the science became better because of the interaction between them. I'm now 66 and somewhat so I'm retiring in a few weeks, but I always say to my younger colleagues, what made my work so nice was the interaction with science and I became a better doctor and I became a better scientist because of the interaction. #00:01:16-8#

I: Great! And that's the perfect transition to my first question which will be **if you could briefly summarize the programme? When did the program start and how is the programme structured?** #00:01:31-8#

Prof. Scherjon: The programme started about 15 years ago. One of my colleagues Prof.dr. T.H. The who was an immunologist realized that it would be good that doctors would encounter much more with science and that they knew what the scientific matters were and how they could use the scientific matters for improving clinical research. So, the programme was started by him 15 years ago and the idea was to get better doctors and especially concentrating on clinician scientist. The programme which is called the MD/PhD programme but accurately it's called the Junior Scientific Masterclass (JSM) has always been integrated with clinical care. So, the Initiative came from the clinic they wanted to make doctors which have more interest in basic science. #00:02:31-9#

I: **How is the programme structured today?** #00:02:35-4#

Prof. Scherjon: What we have in the Netherlands is the Bachelor-phase and the Master-phase and the Master-phase is what we call the "clinical rotation-period" where the students go to the clinic. What we try is: after the bachelor-phase and during the Master-phase that they [the students] get the opportunity to do research on their own. We integrate two years of clinical rotation with two years of science. But that's only possible if the programme already in the Bachelor-phase has its fundament. So, during the Bachelor-phase the JSM offers all kinds of courses, teaching - so they can do a lab course, get experience in animal work for example but also big data analysis or ethics. So, they can make a choice out of around 60 courses which will lead them to possibility to do an MD/PhD application. We now know about 20 % of the students will follow some of these courses and in the end 10 % of the students will finish with

an MD/PhD. The programme is open to everybody, every student can participate in the JSM. It's not a selective programme like the Honours College where students are invited to participate. No, we offer them the possibility to get expired with science, on all different sorts of different types of science depending on their interest, depending what they see during the Bachelor-phase and then having some experience already early during the student phase - they can end with an application for the MD/PhD Programme. #00:04:26-1#

I: It sounds like a **great opportunity to gather scientific experiences**. #00:04:32-9#

Prof. Scherjon: It's a great opportunity for students, but it's also a great opportunity for doctors, so staff members in the hospital, because by the JSM they come in contact with enthusiastic students, students who want to do something extra besides the regular curriculum. So, they want student who are interested in specific parts of medicine and then they can follow these extracurricular courses which gives them the opportunity to come in contact with students. And students come in contact with the clinicians. They learn about the speciality, they can do come experiences in the field an if they like it, they can continue. That continuation can in the end lead to the MD/PhD Programme. #00:05:17-1#

I: To sum it up, **what would you say are the advantages the programme offers for students?** #00:05:23-3#

Prof. Scherjon: I think, one of the big advantages [is], that already early in your training you come in contact with people who are enthusiastic about science and [...] this is a very friendly way to get in contact with science, to see if it's something for you as a student if you like it, if you like the subject and sort of joyful way to get into science. And it's not a competition which is the main thing, but this programme gives you the opportunity to see who is enthusiastic about science, who is enthusiastic to collaborate with other people and so on a very open way students get the possibility to enter a scientific career, if they really want to. They continue it or they can stop it, that's no problem with it. But it's for both sides - for students, but also for clinicians - a possibility to if that's something that really fits to the student's opportunities. #00:06:31-2#

I: As of May this year, we are starting the binational MD/PhD Programme in cooperation [with Groningen], this is why I was also wondering **what are particular advantages in your point of view in the binational programme?** #00:06:50-5#

Prof. Scherjon: What I of course like is that the basic thing in science is to collaborate. So, I always liked the collaboration with Oldenburg and [...] I think this is a possibility both for Oldenburg and for the UMCG to intensify their collaboration. And the second thing is that I like this model so much - it is such a great opportunity - which is also good for German students to have this opportunity to get started with science in such a way. Another possibility is that collaboration between Groningen and Oldenburg also on staff member level could be increased by having collaborative projects. So, staff members from different universities can interchange, they can collaborate in a project and they can make projects even better.

And then another possibility which I think is very important: we can make use of each other's patient data bases or biobanks or materials or anything else to see if a thing works in the Netherlands is also working in Germany, to get bigger patient groups. The combination of two big universities with a huge amount of patients, maybe different patient groups, gives the possibility to elucidate certain aspects from research questions. #00:08:18-0#

I: And as the program is pretty new here we were wondering, **what are the experiences that students report in the Netherlands? How are they reacting to the programme?** #00:08:27-3#

Prof. Scherjon: Students like it enormously. It's so impressive how good students are and how good they do their work within the programme. And you have to realize they do all this work besides the regular things which are needed for their studies so it's all done in their spare time. Students are extremely enthusiastic about the programme and we as staff members, as Principal Investigators, as Masters, are extremely enthusiastic about the students. I'm always impressed to see how good the presentations are, how good the written work is already in the first year and we start with very minor programs so how to find your literature, to have small patient related studies. They do some work with the patient data base and they have to report on it. They have written real project reports on it and I'm impressed by the quality of the written work but also with the presentations which I see from the students on a regular basis. So, they like it very much. They are extremely enthusiastic and we see in the end that the success rate of the MD/PhD Programme which is in the end the goal of the whole programme but it's not THE goal, but one of the biggest goals, 90% of the students who start the MD/PhD Programme will finish it. Which also shows that it's a feasible programme but also that it's carried on by enthusiastic students and enthusiastic masters and principal investigators. #00:10:04-7#

I: **What advice would you then offer to future MD/PhD students?** Is there anything in particular you would to [share]? #00:10:13-0#

Prof. Scherjon: What I like very much is - and what I advise most students - is: try to find people in your surrounding who do science and with whom you can collaborate on a nice way, engage with a research group or a certain person and then on the personal level that you have a good communication with this person and you like the subject and then try to build on the relation you start early in science. So, don't do the MD/PhD Programme because you want to become an orthopaedic surgent, for example, but start the MD/PhD-Programme because you're interested in science and you might be interested in specific scientific problems within the orthopaedic surgery field. And then it might help you in the end to get a resident position in the speciality you like but we know, it's better to do any science within any field, than to concentrate you one subject and it means that even if you write your thesis or you do all your Bachelor work in different fields in your speciality of interest, this was all to lead to better competencies which you might need also for a resident training. So, my advice would be: try to find a group where you like to work, try to find nice people in that group with whom you

would like to collaborate with and within that friendly atmosphere do your science and try to grow this engagement within this group on research and don't do it because you think that you might get your chances for a certain speciality better, no, do because you want to improve you competencies in science. #00:12:12-4#

I: That sounds like some great advice for our future [MD/PhD-] students. We already got a lot of insights from you now, **is there anything you would like to add** - anything in particular you would like to mention? #00:12:24-7#

Prof. Scherjon: I also would like to mention that it's also for us as Principal Investigators it's an honour to take care of these MD/PhD students in the Bachelor-phase and in the JSM and it's good to realize for the students that you don't ask something from the doctors and the investigators to provide you with, but you are also helping these investigators, you are helping to get their science better. You help them with improving their data base and you write something for them and it's like sort of a pearl which is growing and you as a student are also offering something for the people in science. So, don't be shy, try to find the nice people and I would really love that also the students in Oldenburg get the opportunity to start their scientific career already early during their student phase, in the bachelor phase. #00:13:27-8#

I: That sounds like a great call to action! I would like it to end it on this note and thank you very much for all your information and your advice. #00:13:39-0#

Prof. Scherjon: Ok. Thank you very much for the opportunity and so everybody is welcome to find us on the website and we will answer any questions and hopefully we can in a certain way help to start such a programme also in Oldenburg. So, thank you very much for the opportunity to share my lights on it.