



INTERVIEW

MICHAEL JACOBS

“Suddenly I was the patient”

The surgeon who leaves the operating theatre downhearted after hours of surgery, as they have to tell the patient’s loved ones that he or she has unfortunately not made it. In his career, vascular surgeon Michael Jacobs has had to assume this role, known to most people only from films and TV series, more often than he would have liked. He had literally never thought that he himself would ever be allocated the role of patient. “I thought: I’m in the wrong movie. I’ve learned so much from that experience.” As he turns 67, he reminisces about the ‘four lives’ he has had. And about the fifth, which is about to start.

What he often hears around him is “Go and enjoy your retirement while you still can.” But if there is anything that emerges during an interview with vascular surgeon Prof. Michael Jacobs, is that to him, enjoyment equals getting things done. The list of things he has managed to achieve is impressive. And yet he does not refer to himself as ambitious. “Active”, he laughs.

A DECENT CAR

At the time he graduated from secondary school, university medical education was just starting in Maastricht. The pioneering spirit appealed to him, as did the teaching system used there. “I wanted to learn a hands-on trade, help people, not sit behind a desk in an office all day.” Surgery was the discipline he felt most attracted to, and he managed to secure a traineeship with the famous Prof. Greep, who trained students at Maastricht and was head of the Department of Surgery. “To be admitted to this illustrious company, you had to excel in something. And you had to have a decent car.

US, where Prof. Cooley led what was a kind of paradise for complex surgery. “There were 10 operating theatres in one centre, where fifty open-heart surgeries were being performed each day. I easily worked a hundred hours a week; that means your learning curve is really steep. It was great.” His time working as a surgeon, for a total of 40 years, is what Michael calls his first life.

SECOND LIFE

His second life began in 1997, when he organised ‘his’ international conference for surgeons: the European Vascular Course (EVC), for the first time. “At the time there were already too many ‘ordinary’ conferences, but not enough ‘hands-on’ training opportunities for surgeons. We started the EVC in Marseille, followed by a few times in Amsterdam, and for the last 15 years we’ve been at the MECC exhibition and conference centre in Maastricht.” For the three-day event, two thousand surgeons from all over the world come to Maastricht. Three hundred workshops are

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It was a great time, when budgets for social activities were much more generous than now. And so I would find myself once again in evening dress at some smart venue, as Prof. Greep was celebrating the fact that he had got his PhD 25 years ago. Only he could come up with something like that.”

For his further training in complex cardiovascular surgery, Michael then had the opportunity to work in Houston in the

held in 48 rooms. Participants are taken from and to various airports by coach, hotel rooms are arranged. “It’s a huge logistic operation. Fortunately, I have an excellent organising agency for the conference, but I’ve also learned that if you don’t monitor things meticulously, errors will creep in. I can hardly put into words the level of detail this involves. From checking whether people actually arrive on the day they’ve indicated, to ensuring that no unnecessary hotel rooms are

booked, and down to the frozen butter we once had with the 'luxury rolls'. Nowadays I go and sample the goods at the catering firm beforehand. It's just: check, check and double-check."

For someone who once said he was happiest in the operating rooms, you may wonder why he would want to add this source of stress. "At the OR, I perform operations at the most complex level imaginable, and you can't be disturbed or have meetings there. I'm absolutely allergic to the endless rounds of meetings so common in the Netherlands. I want to *do* things and see results. So when at the very end of the EVC I'm standing around at the coaches that are taking everybody home, talking to the young doctors who are so happy about everything they've learned, I enjoy that more than just operating for five days."

MAASTRICHT CHALLENGE

It was in this same entrepreneurial spirit that the challenge of founding a cardiovascular centre (HVC) at the Maastricht hospital appealed to him. But that was not the reason why he returned to Maastricht from Amsterdam in the year 2000. "I was having a great time there as a professor and head of the Department of Vascular Surgery, but the temptation of stepping into Professor Greep's shoes was great. In addition, I was put in charge not only of vascular surgery, but of all surgery, so including traumatology and paediatric surgery; I would be leading a larger group, and I liked a challenge." One year after his return to Maastricht, he was invited to found the HVC, which would represent a one-stop approach for patients with any kind of cardiovascular disease. Until that time, a patient who had to be operated upon or undergo PTCA had to visit six different hospital departments, meaning it would take them four months to get an open-heart operation. We really had to come up with

a different system". After some years of lobbying and attacking some hallowed institutions, HVC got going in 2012. Thanks, among other things, to the cooperation with CARIM, the HVC is now solidly based.

TV PROGRAMME ON SURGEONS' WORK

It is this kind of non-surgical work in the hospital environment that Michael calls his third life. In this life, he was once the first PhD candidate to defend his thesis at Maastricht University, and in 1995 he was the first professor to have been trained at Maastricht. But another element of his third life was his many years of work for a Dutch TV programme on the work of surgeons ('*Chirurgenwerk*'). Or leading the Department of Vascular Surgery at the Aachen hospital, just across the German border. For nineteen years he worked there as a surgeon and head of the department, whereas it was originally intended as a two-year stint. "Within my personal mindset, which is to always want more and bigger, it was fantastic to be head of department in two countries at once. At Aachen we created the field of complex aortic surgery from scratch, and turned it into the

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largest in Germany in five years' time. Mission completed. But at the same time, I'd never recommend anyone to combine two jobs in two countries with two different cultures like that. Since you're 'only' present in both places for half the time, you often get critical questions from your colleagues. You work your guts out and they still say 'I wish you were here a bit more often'."

DINOSAUR

At Aachen, Michael also trained a number of surgeons in complex aortic surgery, as one of the few remaining masters of this art in Europe. In about 10 hours, he and his team are able to replace a patient's entire aorta. For some, often young, patients, this is their only chance of survival. And even if the operation has been carried out perfectly, without complications, 10-20% of the patients still die. "What keeps you going is the thought that without the operation, these patients would almost certainly also have died. You have no

other choice. But this operation is different each time and it means you have to switch between scenarios all the time. That requires a learning curve of some ten years." For a long time, it looked like Michael would not be able to pass on the torch to a successor. He used to call himself a dying species, a dinosaur. "As soon as I had trained some surgeons, they became head of department somewhere else, and that was the end of it. Now at the last moment, there is this younger colleague at Maastricht, Elham Bidar, who is actually interested in continuing this. Apart from the long learning curve you have to go through, you have to be able to deal with the fact that young patients sometimes die, despite your best efforts." He remembers all these patients even better than those who did make it. "The first questions running through your head when someone dies like that, which haunt you even in bed, are: what could, or should, I have done differently? Did I miss something? If you go over this again in your mind, which is a pretty quick process after

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you've done a thousand operations, and you conclude: we did nothing wrong, this was just a matter of a very complex patient, then I can live with it. I've learned a lot from them."

FOURTH LIFE: FAMILY

His fourth life is what matters most to him: his family and friends. He has three children from his first marriage, and an 18-year-old son from his second. "My eldest daughter has a son who's the same age. My grandson and my son get along very well, which is very special. I've invested as much time in the children as I could during my career, but of course it's never enough." Now that his fifth life, his retirement, is imminent, Michael will have to find a new balance. At any rate, he will continue to do the aortic surgery at Aachen for some time, and he is going to hold on to the EVC in the coming years. And then there are a number of interesting projects abroad, which means he might be "working nine days a week" if he is not careful. A nice easy-going holiday in Europe sounds like a good idea, as does not being fettered to his agenda all the time. But going golfing every day, or sitting at home? No.

IN THE WRONG MOVIE

"The people around me are saying: you've given everything you had for forty years, for God's sake go and enjoy the years you've got left! And I definitely intend to do that. Because seven years ago I got to experience how vulnerable I too turn out to be." It was during the EVC that he felt a

massive headache coming on, which turned out to be caused by a tumour in his head the size of a ping-pong ball. "I've had radiotherapy and all that misery. I would be sitting in the waiting room with my wife and thinking: I'm in the wrong movie. Suddenly, I was the patient. And I still am, as last September I had to be operated on again as the tumour had grown back. I have to have a scan every three months, and I get very nervous in the week before that." Although he realises that it is a "completely naive thing to say", until this happened at the age of sixty, he had never thought that he could get a nasty cancer. "I was immortal. As a surgeon, nothing would ever happen to me. Ever since then, '*carpe diem*' is what's etched onto my brain. And I've learned a lot from the experience, about how to communicate with patients. I mainly saw very many good, inspiring colleagues, but also a few who could still learn a thing or two. What I've realised most is that I need to take even more time for breaking bad news to patients. Have they understood the message correctly, or has all the information evaporated due to their nervousness? I've had to face the facts myself."

On 26 April 2024, Michael made his farewell speech as professor at Maastricht University, and on this occasion, he reminisced about his four lives. The speech was entitled "What a challenging journey". "Turning the four paths into a liveable concept, that was the challenge, and I think I've managed that. At least it wasn't a boring journey."