



**ROB RENEMAN AND
TILMAN HACKENG
INTERVIEW**

Each era presents its own challenges

There is a lot of mutual respect between the first and current scientific directors of CARIM. Rob Reneman founded the institute 35 years ago.

Now, at the age of 89, he still keeps close tabs on all developments.

“Whenever a new message is posted on the CARIM website, the first reaction I receive comes from Rob”, says Tilman Hackeng.

Together, they look back on, and ahead to, the first, largest and perhaps best research institute at Maastricht.

The interview takes place at the Maastricht apartment where Rob and his wife Wijnanda live with their dog Femke. Coming to the university is unfortunately no longer an option, so he also had to skip last year’s CARIM symposium, the first time he has missed it. “A great loss to our annual get-together”, says Tilman. Rob concurs, but also counts his blessings. “A good friend of mine, whom I’ve known since secondary school, has lost his short-term memory; so compared to that I’d rather have mobility problems.”

ACTIVE IN SCIENCE

Although ten years ago, when he was interviewed on the occasion of 25 years of CARIM, he already said he was

embarking on his final scientific exploit, it turns out that Rob is still active in science. At the time, he was talking about two papers on free fatty acid uptake by the cardiac muscle, written together with Ger van der Vusse, Theo Arts and Jim Bassingthwaighte from Seattle.

The authors’ average age: 82 years. Unfortunately, Bassingthwaighte died in the week it was published. At present, Rob is working together with Ger van der Vusse, as first author, and Theo Arts, on a review of fatty acid transport from the blood circulation to the cardiac muscle. “It’s the last part of a four-part series. I can’t stop researching.” Nor can he stop his association with CARIM, as it turns out during the

interview. He closely follows the website, brainstorms with newly appointed professors about their inaugural lecture (“I pick up new things from that too”) and, ‘off the record’, poses a few pertinent questions to Tilman about the current state of affairs. The institute is in his heart.

DARING FEAT

“It was not until last year that I really understood what a daring feat the founding of CARIM was”, says Tilman. “It basically meant regarding the very structure of the Medical Faculty, and it required permission from the Ministry of Education.” “That’s right” says Rob. “It had never been done before, and when in 1988 it became legally possible to set up a more independent institute within a university, we were the first to do it, together with Leiden. And yet, we had it relatively easy, compared to nowadays, as there was no pressure of time and money was available. There have been such huge changes since then. I don’t envy today’s young researchers. The way they have to scrape funds together and how they compete on the work floor. That wasn’t necessary in my days, there was enough money around. Tilman has to do his best to keep the people together. I think I’ve had a relatively easy time of it, compared to my successors.”

Tilman: “I don’t know about that, because what you did, setting up such an institute, would be impossible today.”

Rob: “But I had no trouble getting several PhD places a year within the faculty, that was something I could use as a stimulus. They were deployed in research between clinic and preclinic.” Tilman: “The choices you made at the time, like going for translational research, are what has made CARIM great today. That’s why we’re now at the top in Europe.”

SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF

One of the things Tilman is referring to is the publication analysis from 2016-17. Of the 200,000 articles published

worldwide on the subject of cardiovascular research, 0.5% came from CARIM. And of the top 5% of the articles, it was even 1.5%. “That’s an excellent result; something to be proud of”, he says. “It’s a missed opportunity that the university is only looking at whatever generates money, whereas no-one in the world cares about how many PhDs we produce, and how many grants we secure. They world cares about publications with impact.”

FEWER PI GROUPS

Right from the start, Rob established the three main research lines that have formed the basis of the unique selling point of the institute today: Blood, Vessels and Heart. Tilman: “There are many very good institutes working in two of these three domains, but we’ve got all three, and there’s also a lot of cooperation among the three.” Rob: “My PhD supervisor used to say: a medical doctor on his own can’t do research. They need a biochemist and a biophysicist to get anywhere. I’ve tried to introduce that idea at Maastricht. Collaborating is something you do on the basis of your own strength, not from a position of dependence.” Tilman: “That was team science *avant la lettre*. Within the three divisions, we now have six research programmes in which a group of PIs work together with their teams. In the old days, we had over fifty research programmes and PIs within the institute. Way too many.”

DIVERSITY

And, as the current director freely admits, even ten years ago, it was a predominantly male team. “Hidden away at the bottom of a drawer in my desk, I still keep an invitation card for a CARIM symposium held ten years ago, featuring a photograph of the 29 PIs: all men! Fortunately, the situation is now shifting.” Rob remembers an important lesson in this respect which he once learned from a new female staff

member. “I’m married to a staunchly feminist lady, but I still used to make the odd mistake. Once I appointed the lady to the vacancy, and after having been employed for three weeks, she told me she was pregnant. I heaved a deep sigh, and asked her why she hadn’t told me this at the interview. ‘Would you have taken me on?’, she asked. That was a learning moment.”

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Whereas research once used to be an occupation that seemed to know no fixed working hours, young researchers these days do care more about their private lives. Tilman: “Those stories about how it used to be make some young people feel insecure about their academic career. ‘I don’t think about my work when I’m at home’, some say. That’s obviously allowed, but it shows the scientific climate is shifting. Regardless, we still manage to do very well at CARIM.”

The reason why he accepted the post of Scientific Director seven years ago was to be able to facilitate research and researchers. “Giving people opportunities and exploring interesting new research directions, while keeping the good things you have, is a joy. Look at the current development towards stem cell research. That’s caused a huge breakthrough. We can now develop patient-derived cells

into tissues at the lab, test therapies on them and then apply the successful therapy to the patient. I think that’s the holy grail of cardiovascular research.” Rob compliments him on this.

GREAT JOB

“And yet I still think it was easier in my days. It’s obvious you’re doing a wonderful job leading the institute, but I think it’s costing you more energy now that it did me at the time. I didn’t have to prevent competition between our staff members.” Tilman: “Each era presents its own challenges. Nowadays it’s very hard to secure grants; colleagues spend a lot of time writing proposals, are invited for an interview and then still narrowly miss getting the grant. That’s making it ever harder, and thus also more difficult to make a life in academia attractive to people. We support them as much as we can, but the low-hanging fruit is gone. And yet there’s a lot of good stuff too. The interactions between basic research and clinical research are getting closer all the time. We are moving towards a situation where there is one Board for the clinical CARIM and Heart+Vascular Center, turning them into one center: CARIM+HVC. We are, and will remain, a great CARIM community; an organisation where people are genuinely supportive of each other. In the end, this is a great job.”

**COLLABORATING IS SOMETHING YOU DO
ON THE BASIS OF YOUR OWN STRENGTH,
NOT FROM A POSITION OF DEPENDENCE**