

# The Establishment of the PA Profession in the Netherlands

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The Physician Assistant History Society (PAHx) and I recently developed an oral history project that discusses the development of the PA profession in the Netherlands through a series of video interviews. In less than twenty years, the Netherlands has developed a profession that has made a tremendous impact on the country's health care policy, access, and delivery. There are now over 1,600 PAs practicing in the Netherlands. Currently, PAs in the Netherlands are an autonomous medical profession working in a collaborative

setting with physicians.<sup>1</sup> PAs must belong to the Netherlands Association of Physician Assistants (NAPA) Quality Registrar, documenting that they have earned at least 200 hours of NAPA recognized Continuing Medical Education development every five years.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch government subsidizes healthcare institutes that educate PAs, and in addition, education for all students is fully financed by the Ministries of Health and Education.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1 (above):** First Graduates of the University of Arnhem Nijmegen PA Program, Backrow: Mirjam Tuinhout, Mark Smeenge, Geert van den Brink (program director), Hans, Nort Braam, Quinten van den Driesschen. Middlerow: Anja Bos, Monique Bruurs, Anouk van der, Wilmy van Meeteren. Front Row: Frank Holweg (associate program director), Fred Habraken, Ando Kerlen, Frans Jan Bras. Missing in picture is Marco van der Biezen. Photo by Ken Harbert, 2004.

Our interviews begin with Gerard Marciano, EdD, MS, PA-C, and Gerald Simons, MPAS, PA-C, DFAAPA, faculty from the PA program at the Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences. In 2000, several cardiovascular physicians from the Netherlands visited the Cornell PA program and were interested in the use of PAs in cardiovascular surgery. They returned to the Netherlands and started the first PA pilot project at the University Medical Center in Utrecht in 2001.

Dr. Aart Brutel de la Riviere took four students into the department of cardiothoracic surgery at the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, beginning a program that trained physician assistants "on the job".<sup>4</sup> In September 2003, the Arnhem/Nijmegen (HAN University of Applied Sciences) together with the Academy of Healthcare in Utrecht developed a national framework for the master degree education of PAs.<sup>5</sup> They focused on the need for generalists. This became the first of five PA programs in the Netherlands. They received accreditation from the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO) in 2003.

Next we interviewed Geert van den Brink, PhD, RN, CCRN, MHSc, founder and director of the first master-level PA program at Arnhem/Nijmegen (HAN University of Applied Sciences). His vice dean, Bart van Bergen, MS, was the visionary who promoted and obtained funding for the project that would develop the PA profession in the Netherlands. We interviewed Frank Holweg, RN, MHRM, a past clinic administrator and current faculty member, who together with Van den Brink developed a unique work study didactic and clinical curriculum. The program's vision focused on credibility, reliability, and

sustainability.<sup>6</sup> During this program, students spent part of their didactic week working with a physician at the hospital that had selected the student for training.<sup>7</sup> This continued to reinforce their medical knowledge. They created a clinical portfolio focusing on specific tasks that gave specific details benefiting the beginning of the profession. This included the skills students would need to learn in every phase of the program and how outcomes would be defined.<sup>8</sup> Van den Brink is currently the chair of the National Board of Nurse Practitioners and PAs in the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> He continues to be involved in the development of task delegation, legal frameworks, and independent reimbursement for PAs.



**Figure 2 (above):** Frank Holweg and Geert van den Brink, Arnhem/Nijmegen (HAN University of Applied Sciences), photo by Ken Harbert, 2003.

We interviewed one of the first graduates of this inaugural PA masters class, Quinten van den Driesschen, MPA, who was the first president of the Netherlands Association of PAs (NAPA) and is involved in the NAPA working group on international affairs. Van den Driesschen met Richard Rohrs, PA-C, DFAAPA, SFHM, while consulting in the Netherlands. Rohrs, who is a former chair for the International Affairs Subcommittee of the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), assisted Van den Driesschen with the development of NAPA, focusing on commonalities found in the AAPA. In his interview, Rohrs speaks about his work with Van den Driesschen. Both Van den Brink and Van den Driesschen were later knighted for their efforts in developing the PA profession in the Netherlands.

Marcia Andela, - an American trained PA, who was born in the Netherlands and later moved back to Holland - shares her story in her oral history about being a role model for the profession in the Netherlands and showing how PAs can function in family medicine. She helped to promote the profession within the country and assisted Rohrs in his work with health care administrators and providers in the Netherlands. In addition, Kees van Wijk, MPA, PA, who graduated from the Inholland University of Applied Sciences PA Program in 2008, speaks about his experience in long term care and recently with COVID-19 care. Ruth Ballweg, MPA, PA-C Emeritus, discusses her global experiences with the Ministry of Health in the Netherlands and other countries, as well as the framework of program development that Dr. Richard Smith used throughout the United States for his MEDEX programs.



Our interviews also include members of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport who were responsible for the overall regulation and funding of the initial project that created the PA profession in Holland. These interviews included Tom Hoogeveen who was involved with health policy and education with the Ministry for over twenty years. He became actively involved

in the PA profession in 2001 and continued until 2020 working with all the programs and the NAPA. Additionally, we interviewed Ellen Dankers de Mari who is currently the program manager for the advisory committee on medical planning which advises the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport regarding health care, education, and provider need in the Netherlands.

**Figure 3 (above):** Ministry of Health Netherlands: Standing: Wieske van Jins, unknown, unknown, Ken Harbert, Gon Schiereck, Goof Buijs, Raymond Knaap, Ineke Jansen. Sitting: Carien Altink, Hans Arnold, Marine Steenbergen

After a five-year experiment, PAs in the Netherlands gained full independence in diagnosing, initiating treatment, and performing medical procedures, including prescribing medications. Their quality of care includes being involved in a professional code of conduct, registered within the Quality Assurance Register, and follow professional profiles all developed by NAPA.

As a visiting professor with Arnhem/Nijmegen (HAN University of Applied Sciences) from 2001 until 2007, I would like to personally thank Vice Dean Dr. Bart van Bergen for giving me the privilege to be involved in the development of the PA profession in the Netherlands. I also want to thank Dr. Geert van den Brink, and Frank Holweg, whom I worked with regarding the needs assessment, curriculum development and task identification for PAs. In addition, Fons Wierink, who assisted me in networking with various stakeholders in the beginning of the professional development phase. Each of them came to AAPA conferences and visited a variety of PA programs around the United States that helped them to connect with the PA profession in the USA. They were all incredible to work with and together they taught me about the true meaning of global health care and education.



Fons Wierink, Geert van den Brink, Ken Harbert, Bart van Bergen - 2001 Nijmegen, Netherlands

To view the PA History Society The PA Profession in the Netherlands oral history interview series, please click on the following link: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8828788>

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Brink, G. Driesschen, Q. Elfering, L. The Netherlands Physician Assistant, Social Innovations Journal, 8,2021. Pages 1-4.
- <sup>2</sup> IBID page 2.
- <sup>3</sup> IBID page 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Bruurs, M. The Ice is broken. Medical Contact, Netherlands, 3, pg. 443-446, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> BID page 2
- <sup>6</sup> Harbert, K. Brink, G, Smith, R, Bergen, B. Best Practice Approach to the Development of an International Physician Assistant Program: The University of Arnhem-Nijmegen Model. Perspectives on Physician Assistant Education, 15 (1), pages 106-115, 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> IBID, page 1.
- <sup>8</sup> IBID, page 3
- <sup>9</sup> Coombs. J. Trading Places: Utah Partners with Netherlands PA program. PAEA online, November 13, 2019.