



Prof. Dr. Paul W. J. Peters DVM PhD

1942 -2024

It is with great sadness that we record the death of our colleague and friend Paul Peters who died on the 13th of November 2024 after a short illness. Paul was a member of the ETS from the year after its foundation and had served as its president (1986 -1987).

Paul's life was an extraordinary narrative of service not only to the study and prevention of birth defects but also to public health in his own country, the EU and in *underdeveloped* countries. I deliberately use that term because Paul always maintained that "*developing*" was a euphemism that served only as a kind of salve for the consciences of the "developed" nations. He would ask "What about us? Have we stopped developing?"

Paul was born on the 31st of July 1942 in Nijmegen and attended secondary school in Canisius College there. In 1964, after his military service as an officer in the Royal Dutch Artillery, he entered the University of Utrecht and graduated Dr of Veterinary Medicine in 1971. There followed a short period as veterinary surgeon in the

Antwerp zoo and then a residency in Fetal and Pediatric Pathology at the Sophia Hospital, Erasmus University of Rotterdam. The latter led to his lifelong work in Teratology. From 1971 to 1989 he worked at the Netherlands Institute of Public Health and was chief of the unit dealing with Teratology, Endocrinology and Perinatal Screening. While at the NIPHE he did research in experimental teratology and supervised the PhD work of many clinicians and scientists including Alders Piersma and Dick Lindhout. He also co-founded the Netherlands Teratology Service along with colleagues from NIPHE.

In 1976 Paul took leave of absence from NIPHE to work at the Department Anatomy, University of Virginia in Jan Langman's laboratory. And it was there that my 48 year friendship with him began. While there, he completed the experimental work for his PhD which was awarded by the University of Utrecht in 1981. He later translated Langman's famous Embryology textbook into Dutch.

From 1989 to 1993 he was director of the International Clearing House for Birth Defects based at first in Bergen and later in Rome. Between 1993 and 1985 he was seconded as National expert to the directorate of public health of the European Commission where he headed the Action Program for Rare Diseases. In 2000 he left the NIPHE and was appointed Chief Inspector Food Safety Authority of the Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports. He retired from this post in 2005 and in 2007 he was elected to the upper chamber of the Netherlands parliament where he served as a senator for the Socialist Party until 2011. From then until 2016 he served the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an observer on elections in the new republics of the former Soviet Union.

Paul published over one hundred papers in the field of birth defects and reproductive medicine. Perhaps one of his most important contributions was a book, *Drugs in Pregnancy and Lactation* which he wrote in collaboration with Christof Schaefer and Richard Miller and is now in its third edition.

Amidst all this he was constantly on the move teaching and examining in universities throughout Europe, America and Asia. And he was Professor of Teratology within the department of Obstetrics in the University of Utrecht. He taught two courses on Teratology in my institute, University College Dublin. At one of these, a student who had taken a postgraduate degree in linguistics before doing medicine was hugely impressed by Paul's familiarity with classical Greek. Paul was equally impressed by the Irishman's fluent Dutch. Paul also served as extern examiner for two of my PhD students one of whom, Shay Giles, later was a president of the ETS. The celebrations that followed these examinations presided over by Paul were unforgettable!

Paul was in every way a giant not only imposingly tall but also possessing magnificent qualities of mind and spirit. He questioned everything never taking anything for granted and always being suspicious of orthodoxy. Those of us who were active in the ETS at the same time as him can never forget the energy and enthusiasm he brought to the proceedings. He could electrify any meeting and if you joined him in late night discussions you could forget about turning in until the small hours of the morning. Paul had the true charismatic genius for making friends and all of us will miss his wonderful company.

To his children Martijn, Anna, Charlotte and Rosa and to Gemma and Constanza we offer our heartfelt sympathies.

John Bannigan