

## Letter to Jan

Such a gentle giant you were, my esteemed colleague. What a life of accomplishments I am sure you were so busy at work because you knew how powerful the enemy was. You fought a battle against a cancer scourge by creating your own tools of science, helping us all to better track the early signs that this most insidious disease was to arrive and ruin a woman's health, a woman's life, a woman's family. You were not alone, gentle giant, but you were peerless in your crusade, indefatigable, prolific as a writer, constantly improving the tests that you had created and that we grew so fondly of using in our own research. You helped us understand what caused cervical cancer and you were right on track helping humanity to get rid of it some day in a future that you so hoped was not too distant.

You lived in a world of smart and busy scientists like yourself who shared a wonderful calling and a passion for research. Your world used terms like papillomavirus, primers, GP5/6, stringency, hybridization, annealing, oligonucleotides, and others from a dizzying vocabulary so overwhelmingly complex that, early on, we thought that we could not understand each other. You knew that and you also knew that we had better understand you and your colleagues because you had tremendous faith in the message behind the vocabulary. You invited us in into your world by explaining it to those who, like this epidemiologist, had other sorts of scientific tools and were not quite as focused as you were, fighting the same enemy. You knew that we had to unite in the same battle or we could not ever hope to be victors. Well, you did convince us. We joined forces with you and your colleagues from other disciplines. The science of fighting cervical cancer became more strategic, multipronged. Thanks to you, thanks to those who emulated you, thanks to those who understood you. And should I say, thanks also to those who did not understand you, for this helped keep you alert in your crusade in continuing to produce those papers that we had to read to understand papillomaviruses and cervical cancer.

You were never afraid of the dialogue or of the debate. You wrote your ideas and described your techniques in papers whose citations we knew by heart. You knew where you wanted your research to lead you. You worked as a team player. In a team that was exemplary in cohesion, that worked in unison, with such enviable synergy, much like that legendary Dutch national soccer team (I am sure the analogy does not escape you, my friend).

Well, the battle goes on and, for the first time in so many years, we will not have you to lead. I, for one, will find comfort in the idea that you are somewhere out there, ever watchful, helping us to get the lab results right, the epidemiology numbers classified correctly. Like an angel, like a gentle giant looking over our shoulders.

So long, my friend...

Eduardo L. Franco  
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## In memoriam Jan Walboomers

*On February 2nd, early in the morning, the message came in that Jan Walboomers had passed away. It is hard to realize how fragile we are and how things can change in a moment.*

*Jan Walboomers was born on October 7th, 1941 in a small village in Brabant, Gassel. After elementary school in Gassel and grammar school in Boxmeer he studied Biology at the Roman Catholic University in Nijmegen. After graduating (with first class honours) in 1966 he started his PhD in the Department of Chemical Cytology under the supervision of Professor Ch.M.A. Kuyper. In 1970 he received his PhD.*

*In 1970 he accepted a position as a staff member at the Department of Pathology of the Wilhelmina Gasthuis (later the Academic Medical Center of the University of Amsterdam) where he performed research on the herpes simplex virus (HSV). To specialize in Virology he worked from 1971-1973 in the Department of Virology under the supervision of Professor Jan van de Noordaa.*

*In 1973 he went, on a grant from the Dutch Society for Scientific Research (NWO), to the laboratory of Professor Fred Rapp, Department of Microbiology, Hershey, Pennsylvania, USA to study the herpes simplex virus in depth. In 1974 he re-*

turned to the Department of Pathology at the WG where he developed a very efficient method to purify HSV in large quantities. This method is still in use today.

At that time Jan tried to find a relationship between HSV and cervical cancer. Inspired by the results of Harald zur Hausen and Lutz Gissman, his research interest moved in the direction of papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer in 1985. It was in that situation in 1986 that I was able to interest Jan to work with me on HPV and cervical cancer at the Department of Pathology of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. It has been the most fruitful experience I ever had with a scientist. The agreement was clear: Jan did the molecular and I did the clinico-pathological part.

Not only was the special chemistry necessary for success there, but also the friendship. Jan was able to set up a completely new molecular laboratory in a very short time. He became dedicated to the subject and was known as Mr. HPV in the lab and in the Netherlands. The development of a general primer PCR using the consensus primers GP5+/6+ had great impact nationwide and internationally.

Perfectionist as Jan was, using PCR he recognized the problem of contamination immediately and was one of the first to bring about rigorous measurements to prevent it. The results obtained with "his" PCR were so good that the possibilities of HPV testing for cervical cancer screening were already recognized in 1992. For his work on HPV he received the Nen DuPont-Prize for excellent scientific Research in Molecular Pathology in 1991. Besides an excellent scientist, Jan was an enthusiastic, gentle and above all nice fellow with broad interests. This quality helped him set up and increase his national and international HPV network. This resulted in studies with the WHO (Nubia Munoz, Xavier Bosch), studies as a reference lab for HPV detection with Sweden (Joakim Dillner), Denmark (Suzanne Kjaer) and Great Britain (David Jenkins) and several other collaborative studies. By improving and upscaling the technique, large retrospective and prospective clinical studies on the role of HPV in cervical cancer and its precursor lesions could be started, resulting in the message: Without high risk HPV, no cervical cancer!

Last year he was proud to show conclusive evidence that cervical cancer without high risk HPV barely exists and to demonstrate in a large clinical study that persistence of high risk HPV is mandatory for the development of CIN III and cervical carcinoma. So he really brought the HPV field further. But his interest in HPV broadened; other studies followed.

The basic role of HPV in the immortalisation of cervical epithelial cells and host immune responses against HPV infections were other subjects of investigation. Here he had close collaboration with Tom Broker, Louise Chow and Peter Stern. In these studies many PhD students helped him. The results are described in high quality theses, several of which were rewarded with first class honours.

Adriaan van den Brule, Peter Snijders, Frans Cromme, Ana Maria de Roda Husman, Renske Steenberg, Tanja de Gruijl, Hetty Bontkes, Marcel Jacobs and Mark van Duin had their part in the realization of the broad vision of Jan on HPV. Several of them are still active in the HPV field.

To achieve his goals Jan could put over his enthusiastic feelings to the students. He was always prepared to go over papers or projects with a scrutinizing and perfectionistic attitude, resulting in a high quality outcome. During this process he asked much from others, but also from himself. When I asked Jan why he worked so hard and intense, he answered: "Because of a congenital heart disease, during my youth, a doctor had forbidden me to further play football. Later I heard from the cardiologist that this had not been necessary. Continuously thinking about death makes life less interesting and I refuse to do that".

The view that HPV caused cervical cancer fascinated him. He was captured by the idea that it should be possible to prevent women from dying of cervical cancer by vaccination.

Although HPV had been a great part of his life Jan had a broad interest in life. Many friends visiting the lab were taken to museums, concerts or galleries together with his wife Carla. Afterwards he preferred a dinner with a good glass of wine. We exchanged the addresses of good restaurants.

His merits were recognized by the Faculty of Medicine of Vrije Universiteit. In 1997 he was appointed Professor in Molecular Pathologic Aspects of Viral Oncogenesis with specific interest in HPV.

The recognition that a company like Digene strongly supported his ideas was a confirmation for him to further continue his research lines on HPV and cervical cancer.

And then completely unexpected, everything was over...

The HPV field loses in Jan an excellent scientist, a great colleague and a good friend. One of the pure guys who are rare in these times.

My condolences are for his wife Carla and his sons Marc and Niels, for whom it will be difficult to bear this great loss. Jan, we will certainly miss you in the forthcoming HPV symposia and congresses.

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