

Meet 2022 Geoffrey Harris Awardee - Professor AJ van der Lely



We spoke to AJ van der Lely, former ESE President and 2022 Geoffrey Harris Awardee ahead of his ECE 2022 lecture, '[A powerful and almost forgotten tool in endocrinology](#)'. Read on to learn more about his current work, career path and why a chair may be the most valuable tool at your disposal as an endocrinologist.

Can you tell us a little about your current position and research?

At the Erasmus University MC in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, I have had the privilege of chairing a group of enthusiastic and ambitious endocrinologists and basic scientists in the Division of Endocrinology. I work with those involved in the Rotterdam Pituitary Center, which is now chaired by Sebastian Neggers. The Division also includes the Rotterdam centres for thyroid, neuroendocrine tumors (ENETS), calcium and bone diseases, adrenal diseases, obesity and rare genetic endocrine disorders.

Tell us about your career path so far, and what you are most proud of?

Back at the beginning of my training as a gastroenterologist my then mentor, Steven Lamberts, turned me on to endocrinology, prompting me to specialise in neuroendocrinology and pituitary diseases. This offered me great opportunities and introduced me to people like John Kopchick, Cesar Boguszewski, Christian Strasburger, Mike Culler and many, many others. The interplay between the gut and the pituitary really interested me and led to the generation of close collaborations with my Ezio Ghigo, Felipe Casanueva and Thierry Abribat (now the CEO of Amolyt Pharma), and others that are great

friends. My terms as Treasurer and then President of the European Society of Endocrinology also bring back sweet memories.

I'm most proud of my work contributing to the concept of extrahepatic acromegaly. It explains why so-called 'well-controlled' acromegaly patients on somatostatin analogue treatment still suffer from symptoms of acromegaly, despite their normalised IGF-I levels.

What more specifically are you presenting at ECE 2022?

The discovery of hormones led to our understanding of the underlying causes of the often impressive stories that patients were describing to their physicians. Real progress was then made for patients when hormone levels could be measured, sometimes down to picogram ranges. Clinicians could then monitor disease activity and control the efficacy of surgical and medical treatments. However, the availability of such detailed lab results has led to some worrisome developments. The abundance of these test data can lead to physicians dictate how patients should feel and how well a treatment is working, regardless of the patient's actual experience. So, in my lecture, I will try to explain why it is still very important to listen to patients and not to rely solely on lab results - the patient is always right!

What are you looking forward to at ECE 2022?

Being able to physically meet with friends and colleagues again is almost an emotional thing after being forced to mentally hibernate for more than 2 years during the COVID-19 pandemic. Enjoying presentations in a lecture hall is something I'm really looking forward to. The launch of the first European Hormone Day by ESE will also be an impressive initiative for the endocrine community and beyond.

What do you think are the biggest challenges in your field right now?

The endocrine community needs to be more involved in understanding metabolism, not only in rare diseases but also for obesity and diabetes. Endocrinologists' input is paramount for these common conditions so we need to be involved and to avoid focusing too much resource on rare and almost nonexistent diseases. This will help protect endocrine research funding and ensure we are encouraging young, talented people to choose a career in endocrinology.

What do you think will be the next major breakthrough in your field?

Both endocrinology and immunology study the transfer of information from one tissue to another. These very complicated processes would be more readily studied in greater detail using an artificial intelligence (AI) approach. I'm sure neural networks will soon advance our understanding of the complex feedback systems in endocrine control of (patho) physiology. Drug design will also be accelerated using AI to make new compounds that extend the toolbox of clinicians and improve patient care.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

There's never a dull moment when you are working in endocrinology, there are always new ideas, new concepts and new drugs around the corner. What was true yesterday, is wrong today and what is true today is wrong tomorrow. How can you ever be bored when working in endocrinology?

Any words of wisdom for aspiring endocrinologists?

No matter which area of endocrinology you are active in, endocrinology is great fun!