

In memoriam – Dr Johann Teunis Mets



MRCS-LRCP, London (1962); CIH, Netherlands (1968); MD, Pretoria (1979); Fellow, AOMA (1979); DBG, Stellenbosch (1983); Community Medicine (Public Health) Specialist (1984); Occupational Medicine Specialist (2006)

Information supplied by Jeannette Christian – daughter of the late Johann Mets

Dr Johann Mets was born on 30 October 1924 in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. He spent his childhood in Bandung, apart from the period 1928–1933 when his family lived in The Hague in the Netherlands. The young Johann Mets attended the Christelijke Lyceum in Bandung, studying Latin, Greek and Dutch in addition to the more conventional subjects. He was a dedicated boy scout and embraced his love for hiking, adventure and community service, eventually becoming a patrol leader and then the most senior Leader of the Wolves.

In 1941, when war broke out in east Asia, he was too young (at 17 years old) for the Voluntary Air Corps or army so he joined a training camp with the Volunteer Training Corps. The invasion of Indonesia began in January 1942 and Johann was captured by the Japanese in August 1942. He spent time in solitary confinement and was moved to three Japanese concentration camps in as many years. After working as a kitchen assistant, latrine cleaner and a nurse aid, he became a male nurse in the camp hospital, working under a mentor who inspired him to become a doctor. Here he also developed his life purpose of service to others, living and working under harsh camp conditions. His boy scout training (first aid, Morse code, problem solving, steadfastness, honesty and integrity) was put into practice in a multitude of ways. He was elected leader of the Boys Barracks and was part of a small group that secretly constructed a radio and was thus able to get news from the outside world. Discovery meant death, but these fragments of news about developments in the war gave the captives hope and kept them going. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Johann was freed with the others. He located his mother and sisters and managed to get word of his father who had been interned as a prisoner of war in Burma. Six months later, in February 1946, he arrived in the Netherlands with a group of 18–20 year-olds, having travelled from Jakarta on the old mail ship, the *Johan Oldenbarneveltdt*.

After completing an accelerated high school-leaving curriculum, Johann studied medicine at Leiden University after which he served in the Royal Netherlands Army Medical Corps and worked in hospitals in the Netherlands until 1955. Dr Mets met Thea Pleysier, a nurse, in the Zuidwal Ziekenhuis in The Hague and they married in 1954. Two years later, they moved to Indonesia where Dr Mets worked for Shell International Medical Services. From 1956 to 1960, he worked in Pladju, Badjubarang (Sumatra) and Surabaya (Java) as the medical doctor for the Shell International oil refineries personnel and their families. He also assisted those in the surrounding villages. Dr Mets was considered



Dr Johann Mets

a valuable health professional as he was fluent in Bahasa Indonesia and had an in-depth knowledge of the country that he loved.

Dr Mets was sent to study tropical medicine in the Netherlands, and treatment of burns at the Birmingham Hospital Burn Unit in 1959, after which he returned to Indonesia. In the early 1960s, he was sent to St Mary's Hospital in London for special surgical training. Following this, he was sent to Pulau Bukom in Singapore where he ran the Shell out-patient clinic and small hospital from 1962 to 1963. This further developed his interest in occupational diseases and occupational health which soon became the focus of his career. He continued working for Shell International with further deployments to Jakarta, Indonesia and Curaçao, Netherlands West Indies until 1968.

Based on his proven track record of excellence – both medically and managerially – Dr Mets was offered the position of chief medical officer of Shell International (although after first working in Nigeria, which would have necessitated his three children attending boarding school). However, this meant that the family would then have to live in the Netherlands. After careful consideration, he declined this prestigious position and, at the end of 1968, he moved with his family to South Africa.

Dr Mets settled his family in Port Elizabeth and, after a two-year internship at the provincial hospital, he registered as a medical doctor in South Africa. At this point, he had added Afrikaans and isiXhosa to his 'language bank'.

In 1971, he was appointed as medical officer at Volkswagen SA in Uitenhage where he established a comprehensive occupational health service. After many years of meticulous research, he wrote his thesis on 'Absenteeism in a motorcar manufacturing plant' for which he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine by the University of Pretoria in 1979.

He also held additional South African, Dutch, British and American qualifications, and was a member of occupational medicine organisations. In 1981, he and Thea moved to Cape Town where he took up the post of Senior Lecturer in Occupational Health at the University of Cape Town Medical School Community Health Department. He presented papers and lectures at national and international conferences, served on numerous professional committees (also as chair), and published many articles and papers. He strove for occupational health/medicine to be recognised as a specialty field of medicine in South Africa and assisted in developing courses for nurses, health workers and medical students, as well as for post-graduate studies. He

contributed articles and chapters for textbooks on occupational health and medicine and remained a passionate advocate for this specialty to be formally recognised, even after, much to his regret, he retired at the age of 65 in 1989.

Retirement did not sit well with him. He was a talented sportsman in his day and loved being outdoors in nature; he loved nurturing the proteas and silver trees in his garden, and continued to hike well into his 80s. He was an avid reader and was knowledgeable on many subjects, including medicine, science, history, exploration and travel, music, philosophy, religions, wine, and world affairs. Nearly every chair in his house had at least three books next to it.

Sadly, Thea Mets died in December 2015. Johann died four years later, on 12 December 2019. He leaves behind his three children and their spouses, five grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

Johann Mets' children describe him as a loving, generous, kind, dependable, compassionate, wise, clever, articulate, hardworking, dependable, dedicated, academically-excellent man who was steadfast, loyal and honest in everything he said and did. He was a true, loving role model and mentor, not only to his own children and grandchildren, but also to numerous others with whom he interacted throughout his long life.

Johann Mets: excerpt from a letter to the editor, 2011

As part of the occupational health programme in the early seventies for a worker population of more than 6 000 employees I started to offer management an annual 'health check-up' at work on a voluntary basis. Interestingly enough peer pressure appears to have led to fairly wide participation. Members of middle management, which I had noted were often under higher stress, were later also invited to take part.

The consultation involved the usual preliminary interview about health, followed by a general physical examination, urine and blood (liver function) tests and a physical stress test with ECG (our medical facility included equipment for resuscitation, a defibrillator as well as a small laboratory). It was, I think, not at once appreciated by my subjects that this medical check-up was not only aimed at finding possible ill-health indicators (which would then be passed on to the family physician for further action), but also at health education with regard to physical exercise, mental relaxation (taking holidays), and smoking and alcohol usage habits. The latter two aspects led me to introduce some not very popular changes in the lunchroom of senior management. Every workday we were served a two- or three-course lunch with coffee afterwards while, on each table, cigarettes and cigars were provided for an after lunch smoke and chat.

Over a period of a few months I had produced a short 'Health Newsletter' for management to advise them on

matters regarding health preservation and health promotion of the workforce in general, later more particularly directed at management level. A first step to practise what I had preached was having cigarettes removed from the lunch tables, later followed by also taking away the cigars. The adage was that it was felt, that if people wished to poison themselves by smoking, they should not expect the Company to provide the means to do so! On arriving in the lunchroom, I was not really booed but neither was I invited as readily as before to join the table of some of my colleagues. Others, the non-smokers, saw this as a big joke!

The next, less unpopular minor step, was to reduce the calories (Joules) of our meals by banning sweets - this only after having preached the virtue of preserving the right value of BMI (body mass index) for each of us. All this and other aspects of diet and lifestyle had been highlighted before in the health promotion pamphlets mentioned above, but for some time after introducing these changes, I was not a very popular person to come to lunch! Some of the remarks made were to the effect that I should restrict my medical intervention to matters of an 'occupational risk' nature and not meddle in personal affairs such as eating, drinking and smoking!

However, I think that the programme I introduced at that time would now be considered as part of the practice of occupational health, falling under the aegis of 'managing diseases of lifestyle in an occupational health setting'