

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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THE NEXT OBSERVANT ISSUE WILL BE PUBLISHED ON THURSDAY FEBRUARY 13. CHECK OUR WEBSITE AND SOCIALS FOR THE LATEST NEWS



editorial

Out of coffee

Last week, we found ourselves nearly out of coffee. “We’ll just order some online,” we thought. This would normally have been handled by Marion Janssens, assistant to the editors at *Observant*, but she is retiring on 4 February. With no replacement lined up – we didn’t receive a single application for the 0.4 FTE position – the Finance department has taken on her financial duties, which formed the bulk of her work. Other, smaller tasks have been divided up among the team, at least for the time being. It’s made us realise just how smoothly everything ran under MJ’s watch. Ordering office supplies, approving travel reimbursements, communicating with the printer, preparing the annual schedule, arranging advertisements, overseeing the making of the university elections newspaper, taking minutes, managing subscriptions – for years, we never had to think about any of it.

I’ll be in charge of ordering office supplies from now on. Thankfully, MJ stocked up before leaving, so we’re set for the foreseeable future. The university elections newspaper has also become my responsibility. Starting this year, we’ll only handle the layout and printing; the organisational side – making sure candidates submit their texts and get their photos taken by a strict deadline – now falls to UM’s Central Electoral Office.

The coffee situation, however, turned out to be trickier than expected. It wasn’t as simple as just placing an order online, our colleague WD discovered. Only the authorised account holder – the assistant to the editors – has access to *Observant*’s bank account and can make payments via iDEAL. Whoops – that was something we’d overlooked. MJ helped us out one last time, and a fresh supply of coffee has since arrived. We’re still sorting out access to the account.

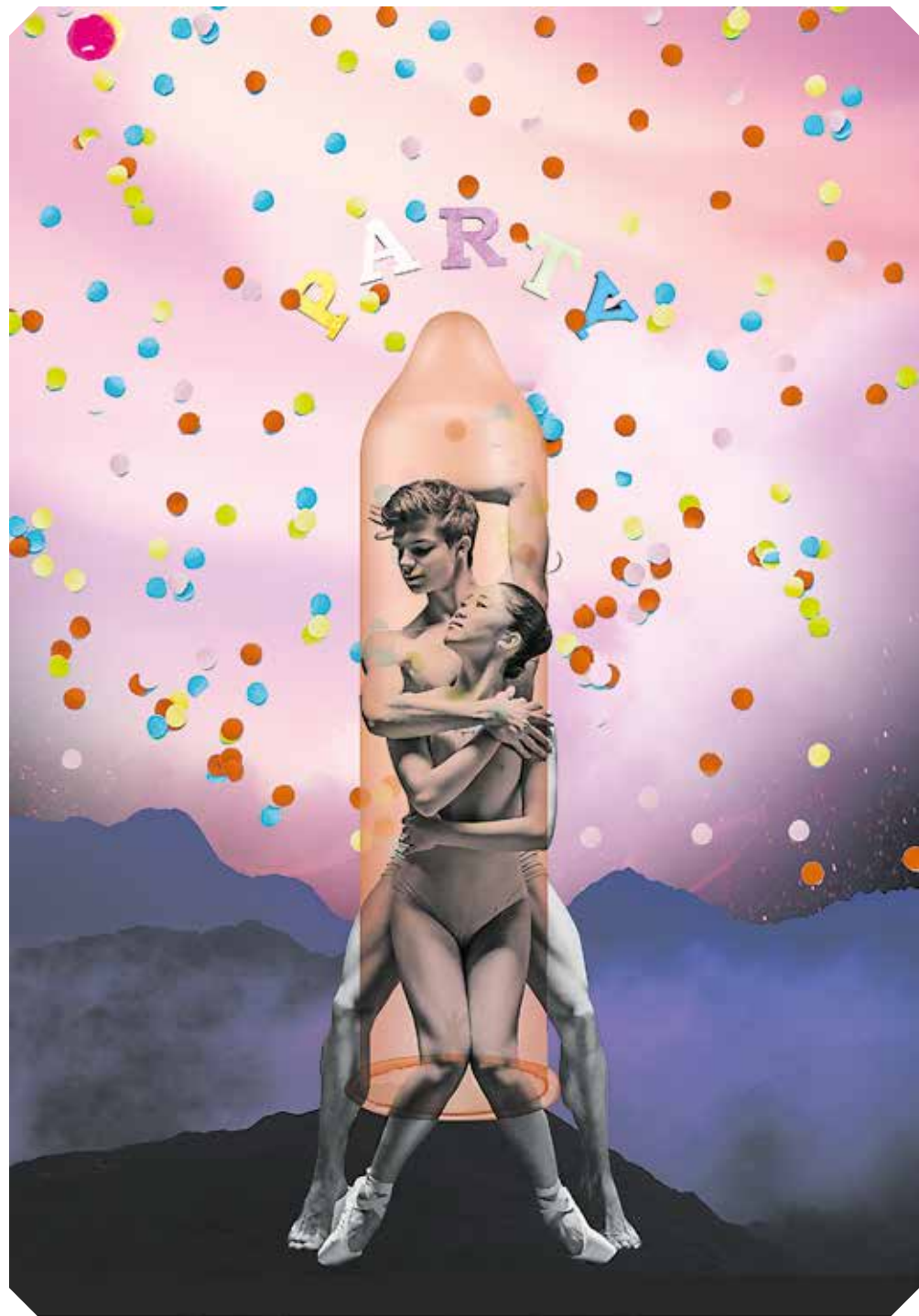
Yesterday, I conducted an interview on unnecessary bureaucracy at UM – a topic we’ve been meaning to write an article about, but it keeps getting pushed back as other things come up. As a small, self-contained team within UM, we’ve been relatively insulated from the red tape that plagues many of our colleagues across the university. We enjoy a great deal of autonomy, and when we do need to align with the rest of UM, MJ was always there to take care of it. We’re going to miss her in the office – not just because of all the work she took off our hands, but most importantly because she’s been such a wonderful colleague.

Riki Janssen

Every week, the editor-in-chief writes about what has been happening at the *Observant* office



series everything you want to know about sex



Collage: Simone Golob

“Condoms are non-negotiable”

Every time you have a one-night stand, you find that you’re the one who has to bring up the subject of condoms. Sometimes your sex partner even tries to persuade you to have sex without one. How can you have safe sex at a time when contraceptive use is declining among younger generations? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte shares her insights.

“We are seeing a certain level of condom fatigue among young people”, says Dewitte. The 2023 *Sex Under the Age of 25* study by Rutgers, the Netherlands Centre on Sexuality, revealed that 40 per cent of young people never use condoms. And in 2024, the Dutch TV programme *Sputten en Slikken* asked five hundred young people if they had used protection the last time they had penetrative sex; only 49 per cent said yes. “They believe condoms ruin the spontaneity of sex, or reduce sensation.”

That’s all nonsense, says Dewitte. According to her, condom use is “non-negotiable. Modern condoms are incredibly thin and come in a variety of sizes. Find one that’s comfortable for you. Bringing up contraception can be part of the seduction process, but it’s also just a matter of getting used to it. And just like with explicitly verbally establishing mutual consent, the more people do it, the more normal it becomes.” Dewitte also has little patience for excuses like “But you’re not at risk of getting pregnant” or “Do I look like I have an STI?” “Enjoyable sex happens in a safe context, and contraceptive use is part of that. Condoms are the only way to prevent sexually transmitted infections. If someone tries to persuade you to have sex without one, they don’t respect you. That’s a huge red

flag. This is about your body and your health, so you’re the one who sets the terms. Make sure you’re prepared and always bring your own condoms. Being assertive isn’t weak – on the contrary, it’s sexy. And if someone doesn’t find that attractive, you should ask yourself if you really want to have sex with them.”

What about in a relationship? Is there a point where you can stop using condoms together?

“Talk about it first. Agree that from now on, you’ll exclusively have sex with each other. Or, if you’re in an open relationship, agree to use condoms with other sex partners. Depending on your sexual history, it might also be a good idea to get tested for STIs first.”

Cleo Freriks

Marieke Dewitte is a clinical psychologist and sexologist at Maastricht University. In this weekly series, she answers questions about sex from students. If you have a question, you can submit it anonymously, scan the code



UM receives “multiple reports” of misconduct, associations unaware of wrongdoing

“Sufficient cause to stop all A-tijd activities”



Archive photo from the INKOM 2003. The Conduct Code of the Introduction Period, that was allegedly violated recently, pays attention to issues such as alcohol consumption
Photo: Philip Driessen/Archive Observant

A lot is still unclear about the extent and severity of misconduct at student societies. Maastricht University reported receiving “signals from multiple sources”, student associations say they are unaware of any wrongdoing.

Last week Thursday, UM requested that all independent student societies and student associations that have their own student societies immediately halt all activities for prospective members, after receiving signals that there had been “one or more instances” of violation of the *Conduct Code of the Introduction Period*, an official UM document that pays attention to issues such as alcohol consumption, sleep and personal integrity. This misconduct happened during the so-called ‘A-tijd’, in which prospective members try to prove their worth as members of a student society (*dispuut* in Dutch).

But how well substantiated are these signals? Is it clear exactly what is alleged to have happened, and where? And was it just one society or were there multiple? Details provided by UM spokesperson Koen Augustijn this week were still sparse. However, he did say that the university received “multiple reports about more than one incident”. All of which are apparently recent reports. “All in all, it was deemed sufficient cause to stop all activities for now.”

UM hopes for a clearer picture after talks on Wednesday and Thursday with the boards of the four largest student associations (Tragos, Circumflex, Saurus and KoKo) and Onafhankelijk Maastricht (OM), the umbrella organisation which represents 31 independent student societies. “We want to know what reports they have received, and whether they are aware of what is happening in their societies.” Those talks should also clarify whether this is “a false alarm

or whether further investigation is warranted”, said Augustijn. He was unwilling to comment on what such an investigation might entail. False alarm? Is it possible this has all been an exaggeration and that activities were put on hold for no reason? No comment from Augustijn. “First the talks, then we’ll see.” Last week, the chairs of the ‘big four’ all told *Observant* that there had been no reports received internally, either by the board or the confidential adviser; only OM refused to comment. Augustijn called those denials “interesting. What does it mean when the university receives signals but the associations don’t? Are the reports we have received inaccurate? Fine, then it will be resolved quickly. But if they do turn out to be true, does their reporting system actually work?”

Dennis Vaendel

More money to students in faculty council

Now that there are new national compensation guidelines for students in participation councils, Maastricht University will significantly increase the compensation for faculty council members: from €140 to €280 per month.

Last year, student organisations ISO and LSVB agreed with universities and universities of applied sciences that the financial compensation for students in central councils, such as university councils, should range from €500 to €1200 per month. A rather wide range – one which UM meets, as the current compensation is a minimum of €570 and a maximum of €850 (members of the presidium, the day-to-day

management of the council, receive the higher amount).

So, who will benefit from these new guidelines? Students in faculty councils. At the moment, they receive about €140 per month; that will double from 1 February. This means the university will be just within the agreed range (between €250 and €525).

F-council activities should cost students about four hours a week. That number is eight hours a week for university council members (and 12 hours a week for presidium members). However, figures from the latest national Monitor of Higher Education Participation Councils show that this is underestimated significantly: in reality, this last group often spends about 20 hours a

week on council activities.

At Maastricht, student representatives have to be present at 75 per cent of all meetings. “After that, compensation is reduced pro rata,” U-Council chair Teun Dekker responded when asked.

The new compensation was approved by U-council members at the most recent meeting. Dekker also took the time to thank Demi Jansen, student at University College Maastricht, former U-Council member and chair of student organisation ISO in the last academic year, for her work, “this was possible because of her”.

Wendy Degens



Bodybuilding versus academia

“

One of the things I love about my job is how diverse it is. A few months ago, I found myself at the International Open Bodybuilding Championship as part of a documentary about doping among athletes, and was interviewed about the role of social media in affecting athlete’s health.

Between all the ultra-buff athletes, in minimal clothing and with tans painted on using paint rollers, I felt like I was on another planet. To say that I stuck out like a sore thumb was an understatement! In my mind, I thought of bodybuilding as a show of physical prowess, involving, for example, lifting unbelievably heavy weights. Instead, groups of athletes would line up on stage and hold various poses that showcased the appearance of their bodies, all while the judges scored their bodies and the crowd cheered. It felt somewhat like a beauty pageant, only with different types of bodies.

In my interview, I tried to strike a balance between describing that yes, overall, social media can contribute to worsened body image and an unhealthy relationship with sport. But no, not all the athletes in the room would have a distorted body image and “issues.”

One quote from an athlete stuck with me, though. She said: “My children will be relieved when the championship is over, because then mommy can eat with them again and does not need to go to the gym for hours every day.”

When leaving, I saw one of the first-place athletes calling her mother: She held up her trophy and was beaming with pride. Bodybuilding required utmost dedication and hard work, and she had been rewarded for that. On the train home I got me thinking about academia. How often I have heard colleagues talk about time with family and holidays infringed upon because “mommy needs to finish a grant application,” and working conditions that led to burnout. I had to laugh when my cousin (in the insurance industry) asked how much money we earned from a journal for each published or reviewed article. She could not believe we did that for free! And yet, for all its flaws, there are reasons we stay, and we too bask in the pride of a published article, or a grant acquired with positive reviews.

It’s important to look with a critical eye at human behavior and the lives of others. And equally so, to take a critical look at our own careers, what we consider “normal,” and what we could change to improve our own well-being, and those of our colleagues.

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Jessica Alleva is assistant professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience

series sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire



/ Melissa Prinz (Los Angeles, United States, 1987)

/ Historian at the Special Collections at the University Library

/ Lives in: Maastricht

/ Relationship status: married to Janosch

Photo: Joey Roberts

“

The process of getting my PhD was emotionally traumatising. It's made it harder for me to trust people

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Old books or new media? I don't spend much time on social media these days. I think I had my fill during the pandemic. I'm a historian, and I've always loved old things. I got my interest in history from my mother. She bought a newspaper for each of her children on the day they were born, and gave it to us once we were old enough to understand what it was. It was her way of teaching us to think about the world we live in – how it came to be the way it is.

Old books are a tangible link to the past. Reading the travel guides in our collections feels like walking in the footsteps of people who lived centuries ago. Everything about them fascinates me – leafing through the pages, the illustrations, handwritten notes in the margins, the smell of old paper...

I believe in love at first sight. Not really. But with Janosch... When we first met, I thought, "There's something special about this guy." I immediately felt at ease with him, even though we'd only known each other for a few hours. And seventeen years later, I still feel the same. He's German. We both did our PhDs in England and thought we'd stay there, but the job market had other plans. With Brexit coming up, we needed a plan B. We ended up in Maastricht – he became an assistant professor at FASoS in 2019, and I started working at the University Library in 2022. I've landed exactly where I hoped to be, in an archive, just with a different backdrop and language.

What's the last compliment you received? Someone told me my Dutch was good. When I first moved here, I was very self-conscious speaking Dutch; I'd blush and stumble over my words. That's changed a lot, and it's nice to hear that people appreciate the effort I've put into learning the language.

What used to frustrate you? I was disappointed we didn't live on the east coast of the US, where the country's oldest buildings are. I'm from Southern California, where the oldest building dates from the nineteenth century. Does that count as frustration, though? I was a happy child. I was 5 when my parents divorced, but I don't really remember that. At my mother and stepfather's house, there were seven of us children; at my father and stepmother's house, there were three of us. I do miss being in a big family, we got along well, but sometimes I appreciate having the house all to myself. I remember myself as being shy, but everyone says I was the loudest one.

What news makes you angry? Can I just laugh instead of answering? Otherwise, I might cry. I'm angry with the US media. In the run-up to the elections, they failed to report accurately and impartially. When a Democrat did something wrong, it got a lot of attention, but the stories coming out about Trump were downplayed. My home country is becoming an oligarchy, where billionaires like Jeff Bezos buy up media outlets and exert influence over them.

Rich or famous? Rich! Growing up in Los Angeles, in the heart of the film industry, I've seen the burden of fame – how the paparazzi chase people, how hard it is for celebrities to be themselves. What would I do with the money? Buy a historic house in the centre of Maastricht, help out friends and family, and support good causes like the theatre group for deaf and hard-of-hearing children I worked with in high school. I got involved through one of my best friends, who is partly deaf. Acting helped those children get used to their hearing aids and learn to speak. It really had a positive impact on their lives.

My parents think I'm ... Um... [long pause] serious. But also quirky and easy-going. I was never the kind of child who'd throw the board across the room if I lost a game. I played a lot of sports, which taught me to play fair and cope with losing – valuable lessons for adults as well.

What's the hardest thing you've been through? Getting my PhD. My dissertation was excellent, but there was a conflict of interest with two of the examiners, who managed to sway the committee to their side – I had to resubmit it. My research undermined much of the work of one of them; I think she saw me as a threat. I had to take legal action to get things sorted. A new committee passed me, and I settled with the university, but I still haven't been able to publish my dissertation. The whole process was emotionally traumatising – it's made it harder for me to trust people.

Never fly again or never eat meat again? What a cruel question! I eat a lot of meat, though I'm trying to cut back to reduce my environmental impact. But how else would I visit my family in the US without flying? What's that? They'd still be allowed to fly? In that case, I'd give up flying and keep my steak. I'd pay for their tickets – it seems only fair.

Peter Doorackers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

University Council discusses tool for assessing partner institutions' involvement in human rights violations

"This university is adding fuel to the fire"

"Why say no to Israel but yes to Saudi Arabia and Iran?" challenged Eliyahu Sapir, assistant professor in Social Science Research Methods at Maastricht University, as he addressed the members of the University Council. Wednesday 22 January, the council met to discuss the Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) framework, a tool designed to assess UM's administrative partnerships with institutions in countries violating human rights.



Student members U-council in Tapijn before the meeting last Wednesday Photo: Joey Roberts

According to UM President Rianne Letschert, the HRDD framework is needed to strike a balance between international collaboration and staying true to university values. "If a partner institution turns out to be involved in serious human rights violations, this framework allows us to determine whether it should remain part of our 'family'", she explained during the meeting.

Yesterday's University Council meeting marked the first time the document was made public, in January 2025, even though the Executive Board announced the framework in early 2024. This was prompted by pro-Palestinian protests at universities, including in Maastricht. However, Letschert stressed that the framework does not exclusively apply to Israel. As early as autumn 2023, she explained, a working group started developing a global engagement policy regarding partners in regions such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, it is clear that the escalation of conflict in the Middle East and the strong call for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions have made this one of the most pressing issues for the university administration.

Guest lectures

During this pilot year, all existing administrative partnerships with institutions will be assessed – hopefully by October, said Letschert. Israel will be one of the first three cases to be evaluated. The process will be overseen by a newly established body, the Sensitive Partnerships Committee, which will include the

chairs of three subcommittees on human rights, knowledge security, and fossil/sensitive industries.

But who exactly will be subject to its scrutiny? The framework applies to so called "institutional partners", but does it also apply to guest lecturers, recipients of European research grants, and other individual initiatives? This question was raised by assistant professor Ewout Meijer from the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. He argued that academic freedom is at risk. However, Letschert assured him that the framework does not extend to individual activities. Meijer also wondered why UM thinks it's up to the university to determine whether a country has "clean hands". "Isn't that the role of the International Criminal Court? Such investigations take years, and now UM wants to take matters into its own hands. Is that diligent?"

Unwise

Both Eliyahu Sapir and Benoit Wesly, the honorary consul for Israel in the southern provinces of the Netherlands, argued that it is not this university's place to pass judgement on crimes or engage in politics. Sapir described the policy as "ethically problematic" and "unwise. It will harm UM's reputation". Meanwhile, Wesly accused the university of "adding fuel to the fire. UM should steer clear of political involvement. Mind your own business." This did not sit well with student representative Shari Crespi, who countered, "Universities have always

been political institutions. I'm extremely uncomfortable with someone telling me what is and isn't my business."

Belgium

Academic staff representative Mark Govers wanted to know why the framework first examines the countries where UM has partner institutions before assessing the involvement of a specific institution, if relevant. "Why start with the country?" Letschert: "It's our first threshold. Otherwise, we'd need to assess all institutions we have administrative partnerships with, even in countries like Belgium." Non-academic staff representative Maarten van Wesel echoed Govers's concerns, citing the example of an American university previously involved in human rights violations. As the US is not considered a "red flag" country, would such an institution escape scrutiny under the framework? It was explained that a solution exists for such cases: whistleblowers can report their concerns to the committee.

With around twenty points of disagreement remaining among council members, the University Council postponed its advice to the next plenary meeting in February. Chair of the University Council Teun Dekker explained that a digital vote will be held to arrive at a unified recommendation.

science

Max Nieuwdorp to deliver Catharina Pijls Lecture on the role and influence of hormones

HORMONES ARE IMPORTANT, “BUT NOT AS IMPORTANT AS GENES”

Text: Peter Doorakkers **Photo:** Shutterstock

Oestrogen, testosterone, adrenaline and insulin are just a few of the many hormones our bodies produce. They affect both body and mind, but to what extent and in what ways? Professor and endocrinologist Max Nieuwdorp from Amsterdam will explore these and other questions this Thursday during the Catharina Pijls Lecture. Are we at the mercy of our hormones?

Hormones fascinate Max Nieuwdorp – so much so that he wrote an entire book about these substances that regulate a wide range of physiological processes, from growth and appetite to falling in love and ageing. Published in 2022 by De Bezige Bij, *Wij zijn onze hormonen* [*We Are Our Hormones*] takes readers on a journey through the human body, from conception to death. Nieuwdorp draws on examples from his medical practice as well as both recent and distant history. The topic is undoubtedly fascinating, but the reader also comes away with the impression that there's still a lot we *don't* know.

Interaction

“Absolutely”, Nieuwdorp agrees over Zoom. What is the biggest hormonal mystery he would like to see solved? “How a single hormone can have completely different effects on different people. Take people with an overactive thyroid [which produces hormones that regulate metabolism, among other things]. Most lose weight and feel a bit restless, but I've had patients who became psychotic, manic or sexually uninhibited. We still don't know why an overactive thyroid can cause psychosis in one person while another person experiences hardly any psychological symptoms.” He notes similar variations in menopausal symptoms. “Menopause affects every woman differently. Those differences puzzle me. It's likely not purely genetic; we suspect that hormones communicate with each other.” But it remains unclear how exactly this interaction works. Nieuwdorp's book aims to shed light on these complexities and help people better understand their own bodies. This is urgently needed, he says. What's the most common misconception he encounters? That everyday stress is caused by an overdose of stress hormones. The opposite is true, explains Nieuwdorp – stress hormones are a response to external triggers. “If you've got a fever, your body releases cortisol – a stress hormone – to repair itself. If you're startled, your body produces adrenaline to help you react.”

Free will

The title of the book, *We Are Our Hormones*, is a nod to the Dutch bestseller *We Are Our Brains* by neurobiologist Dick Swaab. Swaab argues that brain processes determine who we are and what we do, which means we don't have free will. Are we similarly at the mercy of our hormones? Nieuwdorp laughs, shaking his head. No, he says, “I don't believe everything is predetermined. You won't hear me deny the existence of free will.” Genetically, we are the product of our ancestors, he explains; our genes provide the foundation for who we are. “On top of that, there's the influence of hormones, as well as the environment. Your hormones play a role in ‘shaping’ your body, but I believe they're less important than your genes.”

The Catharina Pijls Lecture will be held on 30 January at 8.00 p.m. in the auditorium of the SBE building at Tongersestraat 53. For registration, please visit maastrichtuniversity.nl/sg. The Encouragement Award and lecture are initiatives of a foundation, named after Geleen pharmacist Catharina Pijls (1909-1993). In 1984, she established a foundation to promote research and education in the health sciences.



Catharina Pijls Encouragement Award goes to master's thesis on healthcare worker well-being

LOW WAGES AREN'T THE MAIN ISSUE

It's not low wages but rather high workloads and poor work-life balance that are the main challenges facing healthcare workers today. That's the conclusion of Health and Digital Transformation student Eline Noorman in her master's thesis, for which she will receive the Catharina Pijls Encouragement Award this Thursday. The prize is awarded annually to the best health sciences master's thesis at Maastricht University.

Noorman investigated how healthcare organisations can improve the well-being of their employees. She surveyed members of PGGM&CO – the membership organisation of the Dutch healthcare pension fund PGGM – about their mental, physical and financial health. Overall, respondents rated their well-being as barely satisfactory, with nearly 40 per cent deeming it unsatisfactory. This result is hardly surprising, given

the high rates of burnout in the healthcare workforce. But the good news, says Noorman, is that employers can support their employees' mental health by providing tools to help manage workplace stress. She delved into the literature on new technological solutions, such as work-planning software and relaxation apps. However, these tools are not without their drawbacks: “If employees feel constantly connected to work, they risk

becoming overstimulated. Organisations need to set boundaries to prevent this.” Was she surprised to win the award? “Absolutely”, says Noorman. “I didn't even know I was in the running.” The €2000 prize money will certainly come in handy: “My partner and I have just bought a house – we're getting the keys in March. The money will go towards the renovations.”

Honorary doctorate for neuroscientist Katrin Amunts

“IF SHE HADN’T TAKEN THAT RISK, WE’D STILL BE HESITATING”

Text: Dennis Vaendel **Photo:** Mareen Fischinger Fotografie

From her scientific contributions to her leadership in major international projects, Katrin Amunts’s achievements are “impressive and inspiring”. This is why it is entirely fitting that the German neuroscientist will receive an honorary doctorate from Maastricht University at this week’s Dies Natalis celebration, say her honorary supervisors Rainer Goebel and Alard Roebroek, both professors at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN).

“Nearly everyone in the room was shouting, but Katrin remained calm, respectful and composed”, recalls Goebel of a tense meeting in Brussels about a decade ago. He was there after his work in a mediation team, engaging with the board of the Human Brain Project (HBP). Launched in 2013 as one of the largest European research projects ever, the HBP was allocated hundreds of millions of euros in EU funding. Its ambitious ten-year goal: to develop a model capable of simulating the entire human brain. But within the first year, problems arose. Scientists worldwide were critical of the project, publishing a scathing letter in *Nature*. “It was an unattainable goal”, says Roebroek. “The human brain contains around one hundred billion nerve cells, or neurons, forming trillions of connections to each other. Even today’s supercomputers are incapable of fully simulating

that. The project also needed better balance – there was too much emphasis on data and supercomputers, and not enough on neuroscience.” And, adds Goebel, it needed more democracy so that “its direction was no longer dictated by a handful of leaders.”

Talent to stay calm

That’s where Amunts came in. After the Brussels meeting, her colleagues elected her as the project’s new scientific director. “From that moment, the HBP became a huge success”, says Roebroek. “And whenever things threatened to go wrong again, Katrin managed to turn them around. Scientists are passionate about what they do, and emotions can run high sometimes. It’s a talent to stay calm when the stakes are so high.” Goebel, who worked closely with Amunts as a fellow board member for several years, is equally impressed by her leadership qualities. “Just think about it – the project involved over five hundred researchers from about 150 institutions and ended up getting more than half a billion euros in funding. Everyone wanted money for their own niche topic. Keeping

everyone on the same page was an incredibly difficult task, but Katrin managed it with her amazing leadership skills. Without her, there wouldn’t have been an HBP.” And the project continues to bear fruit, explains Goebel. While the HBP formally ended in September 2023, results are still coming in and being published in leading scientific journals. “Partly thanks to Katrin, the focus was on challenging but achievable goals.” Examples include how seizures spread through the brain in conditions such as epilepsy, says Roebroek, or mapping how the brain controls hand movements – work that could help advance the development of robotic arms. “And gaining a better understanding of how the brain functions will also contribute to the continuous improvement of artificial intelligence (AI).”

Both professors emphasise that Amunts didn’t just play a key role as a leader in the HBP. Roebroek describes her scientific contributions as “groundbreaking” and “visionary”. “Katrin takes on challenges that others see as impossible.” Goebel: “She doesn’t think in terms of two- or three-year grants, but in terms of projects spanning up to twenty years. That takes courage, patience and perseverance.” Roebroek highlights the Jülich-Brain Atlas, a three-dimensional map of the entire human brain that lets you zoom in – Google Maps-style – on even the smallest structures. “It was a Herculean task, involving cutting a brain into thin slices, putting them under a microscope and then combining all thousands of digitized slices in one model. When she began some fifteen years ago, they weren’t even sure the technique would yield the desired result. But it worked, and now we’re building on her results in our own research. If she hadn’t taken that risk, we’d probably still be debating whether to take on such a daunting challenge.”

More than deserved

Amunts’s impact in Maastricht extends beyond research to education. “In her work, she skilfully connects the functioning of the brain at the micro level of neurons to the macro level of entire brain regions, for example”, says Roebroek. “This requires mastery of various techniques and expertise across disciplines – neuroscience, psychology, biology, mathematics, IT”, adds Goebel. “In this way, she was one of the main sources of inspiration for the new bachelor’s programme in Brain Science launched last September, which embraces this transdisciplinary approach.” The honorary doctorate Amunts will receive on Friday is her first. “That’s not so unusual”, explains Goebel, “as they often come later in a career. But it’s more than deserved.” “In fact”, Roebroek concludes with a wink, “it’s an honour for us to be the first to award her an honorary doctorate. Many more distinctions will undoubtedly follow.”



KATRIN AMUNTS

Katrin Amunts (Potsdam, Germany, 1962) is a professor of brain research at Heinrich

Heine University Düsseldorf, where she heads the Cécile and Oskar Vogt Institute of Brain Research. She also heads the Institute of Neuroscience and Medicine (INM-1) at Forschungszentrum Jülich. From 2016

to 2023, she served as the scientific director of the international Human Brain Project. In 2022, she was awarded the German Order of Merit for her “outstanding commitment to the field of neuroscience”.

On Friday January 31, the day of the Dies Natalis ceremony, Katrin Amunts gives a talk on her research during a mini-symposium (09:30 till 11:30) in the Blauwe Zaal at Universiteitssingel 50.

science

PhD researchers share evidence-based health tips

“So much research that is just gathering dust on a shelf”

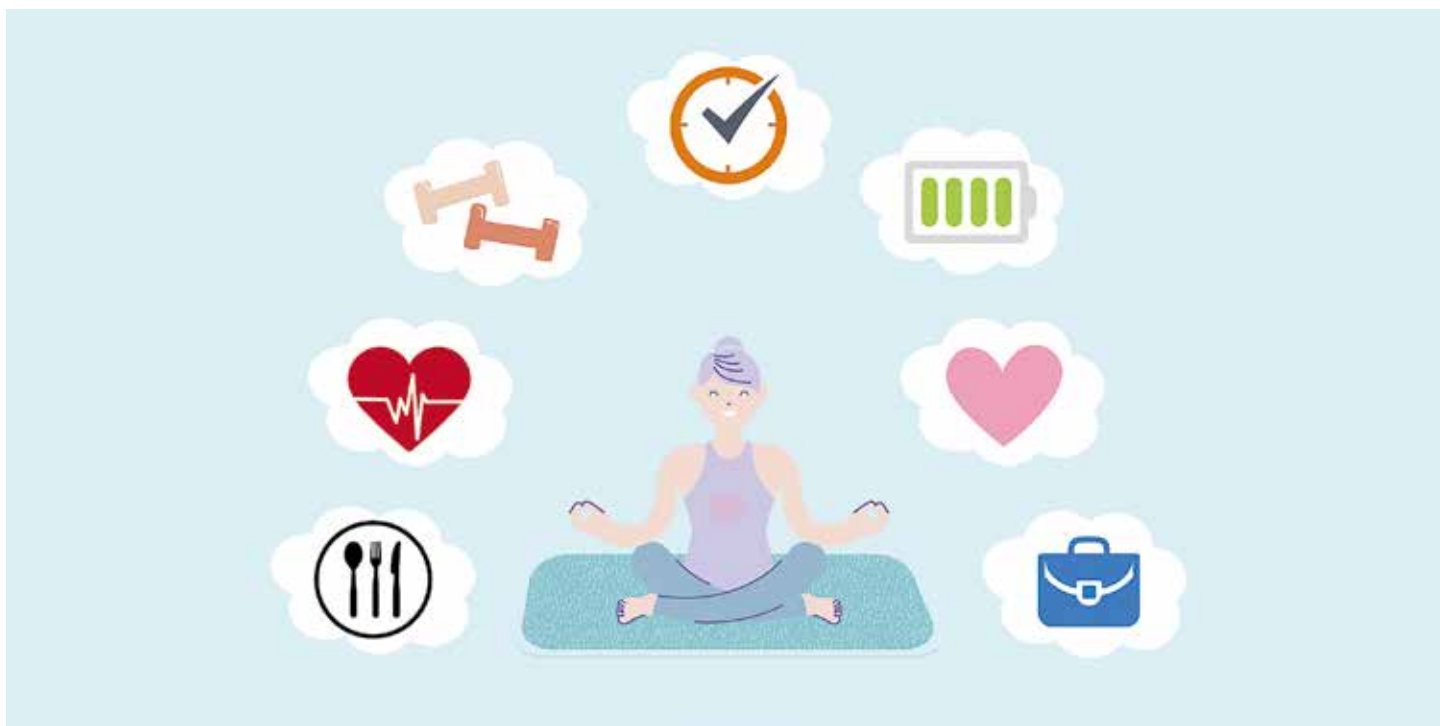


Illustration: Pixabay

Eat healthier, exercise more, spend less time on your phone and get eight hours of sleep a night – improving one’s lifestyle typically ranks high on the list of New Year’s resolutions, and 2025 is no exception. There’s no shortage of research on this topic. But how do you make sure those findings reach the public? And how do you separate fact from fiction? During their time as PhD researchers at the Care and Public Health Research Institute (CAPHRI), Lieve Vonken and Gido Metz came up with the idea of sharing evidence-based health tips – research-backed advice for living a healthier life.

Do your grocery shopping in the morning, when you have more self-control than after a long day at work, to reduce the temptation to buy unhealthy snacks. And aim to get up at the same time every day; it boosts productivity and helps prevent mental health problems.

These are just two of the research-backed tips collected by Vonken and Metz and shared through Maastricht University’s Instagram, website and intranet last year. The idea for the project was born during a health psychology conference in Bremen.

“Before the conference, we attended a workshop where we were asked to come up with a science communication activity”, explain Vonken and Metz. In other words, how can you get your research noticed by the general public? The two researchers set themselves an additional challenge: “Our work focuses on health promotion and behavioural change. So when we’re asked to communicate something, we immediately start thinking about how we can use that to actually make a difference. That’s what we ultimately want – it has to serve a purpose.”

The answer came naturally to them. “When my friends hear about my work, they often ask things like, ‘Should I take ginger shots?’ There’s so much health information out there, and not all of it is true. And I don’t have the answer to that question – I’m not a dietician”, says Vonken, who now works in the Preven-

tion and Vitality Programme at MUMC+. “But there are things I do know, or that my colleagues know. They develop complex interventions to help young people eat more healthily, for example. So, perhaps we should make that research more visible and share more of our knowledge.” Metz adds, “We thought, if we’re going to share research findings, they should be useful for students in particular. As a target group, they are relatively open to change.”

And so what began as an idea in Bremen became a project in Maastricht. Vonken and Metz approached their colleagues for evidence-based dos and don’ts revolving around themes such as healthy eating, love and sex, and sleep. “The tips range from ‘Put your phone away half an hour before bed’ to the importance of contraception”, says Metz. “And they’re not necessarily groundbreaking”, adds Vonken. “They’re easy to apply and were met with a lot of enthusiasm. Someone at the hospital even asked if the tips could be shared there.”

However, the project’s original target group – students – was less responsive. “We didn’t get a lot of reactions, so we don’t know who actually read the tips on the university website or social media. It’s hard to tell”, the two researchers admit. “And because we chose the topics ourselves, it’s possible they didn’t fully resonate with students.”

In total, around twenty tips were shared, but there’s no shortage of source material. “There’s so much interesting research being published, but it can be difficult for non-researchers, like students, to find. It just ends up gathering dust on a shelf instead. We could definitely keep this project going for a while”, say Vonken and Metz, who have already started brainstorming new ideas. “The format seems to work well. We could make a tear-off calendar, with a tip for each day.”

Deborah Blekkenhorst

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