



OBITUARIES

Nico van Hasselt: the oldest practising GP in the Netherlands

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Utrecht, the Netherlands



[Image: Credit: Marc Driessen]

When Nico van Hasselt died in Amsterdam, days before his 94th birthday, he was the Netherlands' oldest practising general practitioner. To the end, he met the commitment he made while in a cell during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in the second world war: if he survived he would dedicate his life to helping others through medicine.

He did exactly that: he became a doctor, and despite the best intentions of some to persuade him to stop working, he refused. In doing so he won a legal battle which meant that GPs could no longer be asked to retire solely on the grounds of age. He was still seeing patients in the week before his death.

Lucky escape

Van Hasselt had been set to follow his father into banking in the quiet eastern town of Deventer when war interrupted his education. He progressed from protesting against the sacking of his Jewish school headmaster to stealing a German soldier's revolver. He was betrayed and sent to a concentration camp in Vught, from which he escaped. He was then recaptured by the German navy when trying to cross the North Sea.

Sentenced to death at just 19 years of age, he shared his cell with a doctor, Meindert Brouwer. During philosophical discussions, van Hasselt was deeply touched by his cellmate's passion for his profession. He explained: "I concluded that the meaning of my life was to serve others, and I swore that if I

survived the war I would study medicine, become a GP. I have stayed true to that vow to this day."

Van Hasselt had two lucky escapes. His execution was set for 5 September 1944 but did not happen. It was "mad Tuesday," the day the Nazi occupiers panicked as the Allies rapidly advanced through neighbouring Belgium. Later, his name was crossed off a list of detainees to be transported to Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany, in which nine of the Dutch prisoners died. Red Cross official Loes van Overeem had declared—"with a wink"—that he was far too ill to travel.

Having survived the war, van Hasselt studied medicine in Amsterdam and Leiden. He qualified in 1956 and established his GP practice in Buitenveldert, a suburb in southern Amsterdam, three years later.

For nearly 60 years he ran his family practice—with his wife, Ineke, acting as doctor's and pharmacist's assistant—with a workaholic dedication to his patients. He disliked taking holidays, paid regular (often free) house visits to his patients, and kept detailed records of their family histories on a card system in his practice.

Refusing to retire

In 1991, however, the Amsterdam and district national health insurance company ZAO, which reimbursed his patients' treatment costs, wrote to him suggesting he retire. He refused, arguing it was nonsense not to consider whether someone was physically and mentally able to continue. Eventually, by 1994, the company ended its contract with him on the grounds that he was older than 65. It meant that van Hasselt would eventually not be paid. He carried on treating patients free, reimbursing drugs out of his own pocket. It would be 11 years before the Equal Treatment Commission found that the health insurance company had contravened the Equal Treatment in Employment (Age Discrimination) Act by not signing a new contract. It stressed that the quality of GP care was protected by the requirement for GPs to be re-registered every five years and accredited annually by their professional bodies. Van Hasselt was, at the time, registered until December 2006.

The chair of the Dutch Society of GPs, Bas Vos, praised his "passion and determination," which had shown that age is

unimportant and GPs should be able to practise as long as they wish to and are able to. Van Hasselt, then 81, continued. The healthcare inspectorate later scrutinised his practice, but when he died he was still registered to practise until the end of 2018.

By 2016, a 92 year old van Hasselt celebrated 60 years as a doctor, his practice surgery still opening at 7 am. He still undertook up to eight house visits a day and never installed an answering machine. Of his 900 patients, 500 had attended his surgeries for 40 years or more. He said: "The patient comes first, for everything. I know them. I know what happened to them years ago."

Despite the return of a cancerous tumour on his face, which had been treated by surgery in 2008, he continued to work until, feeling unwell, he called for an ambulance and died in hospital two days later.

Estella Heesen wrote an authorised biography of his life—*Opgeven . . . Nee Dus!* [Give Up . . . Not Likely!]. She

believes that van Hasselt was troubled by his war experiences and found sanctuary in his work, "but he was a GP whose patients were always the most important thing, even though he could also be very difficult, convinced he was right, and not open to compromise."

He leaves his wife, Ineke van Hasselt-van Paassen; a daughter, Rosalie van Hasselt; and three granddaughters. His son, Klaas, predeceased him.

Biography

Nicolaas Johannes Hendrikus van Hasselt (b 1924; q 1956), died from old age and exhaustion on 14 February 2018

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