



GLOBAL CAREERS

HIV/AIDS Ambassador

Besides the well known medical professions as physician, medical specialist or researcher, there are a lot more interesting career possibilities in (global) health care. With these short interviews we want to introduce different, interesting, sometimes unknown, professions to you. **LH**

Let's introduce

Marijke Wijnroks lives in the Netherlands and currently is the HIV/AIDS Ambassador for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She is also a doctor.

How would you describe your career path?

I have always wanted to work abroad as a doctor. After I graduated in 1986, I specialized in tropical medicine and traveled for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to Southern Sudan. There I became more interested in public health, seeing how little curative care I could offer. After my work in Sudan, I became the medical coordinator of a public health programme in Uganda. After Uganda I worked in Bangladesh for an NGO and later in El Salvador in a primary health care project for the WHO. Gradually I had moved from being a practicing doctor to a policy maker. In 1998 I started working at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Over the years I became involved

in HIV/AIDS and linked international organizations. I can use a lot of my practical experiences now that I am the HIV/AIDS Ambassador and I truly believe that I have the most interesting job in the world.

Could you describe your work as the HIV/AIDS Ambassador?

As the HIV/AIDS Ambassador I represent the Dutch policy and priorities on HIV/AIDS, both in the Netherlands and abroad. I attend meetings, visit countries that are affected by HIV/AIDS, discuss policies and represent the Netherlands in international organizations. The Netherlands is an important donor to HIV/AIDS and we have good experiences at national level. For instance, we have one of the lowest rates of teenage pregnancies and abortion in the world and manage the spread of HIV among injecting drug users by providing clean needles, methadone and so on. So people are certainly listening to us.

Which moment in your career made the greatest impression on you personally?

I started my career in Southern Sudan in a war situation. The town I worked in was under siege by SPLA and road transport was not possible. The plane that brought supplies was shot down four weeks



Global health is an absolutely fascinating field to work in



In 2031,
AIDS will exist 50 years

>50% decline in new malaria
cases in some African countries

4.9 million lives saved through
Global Fund programmes



After I graduated I specialized in tropical medicine and traveled for MSF to Southern Sudan

after I arrived. So we were pretty much on our own without supplies or communication. The situation became more unsafe in the months that followed. It was pretty tough, also for my family who heard little news except for the occasional newspaper article about fighting and killing around the town I was based in. I finally managed to leave after ten months with a military convoy. It was a formative experience, also because I had just turned 25 when I arrived, so I was really inexperienced. After surviving such a situation – mentally and physically – there are few things that scare you off afterwards. So it certainly meant a lot of personal growth in the end.

You have been a representative of the Netherlands in The Global Fund. What is the most important development concerning these diseases in the last years?

The most important development is no doubt that we are seeing that we can turn the tide to these epidemics and that our investments are producing results.

The number of new infections with HIV is leveling off and the number of people accessing treatment has increased dramatically. However treatment needs to be sustained for life and universal coverage

will be unattainable and unsustainable unless we invest in prevention now. Malaria is probably the greatest success of all. The reduction of morbidity and mortality rates due to coverage of bed nets and effective treatment regimes is really impressive. Several African countries are now making plans for eliminating malaria– which is something I would never have considered feasible a few years ago.

Thirty years ago HIV was discovered. The number of infection has increased from 60 000 in 1990 to 33 million in 2008. How do you see the future of the fight against HIV-AIDS?

The AIDS2031 project – a group of people studying future implications of the AIDS epidemic has done interesting modeling exercises, looking at different scenarios. Although these models need careful interpretation, I believe they demonstrate the importance of thoughtful funding. The study concludes that a combination of prevention efforts, focusing on groups most at risk (young girls, men having sex with men, drug users, sex workers) together with long-term efforts to address drivers of the epidemic, such as the poor status of women and poor quality health care will be most effective.

Finally, which message would you like to give to future doctors?

Go for it! Global health is an absolutely fascinating field to work in.

Do you want to read more about Marijke Wijnroks and her career? Visit our website www.globalmedicine.nl.