

Obituary

**Albert Geerts**  
**One of the “young boys”**



Albert (Bert) Geerts died on 24th January, 2009. He was born on 29th September, 1952.

Bert was one of the most renowned liver cell biologists. He began his undergraduate career as a pharmacist and in 1982, he joined as Research Assistant and then as Assistant Professor the Laboratory of Cell Biology and Histology at Vrije Universiteit Brussels (V.U.B.) directed by Prof. Eddie Wisse. From 2002 he was Full Professor of Cell Biology in the same University.

I must admit that I had problems writing this obituary in memory of Bert. In general, obituaries include a long list of scientific achievements of the colleague who has died. I have written several versions based on Bert's curriculum vitae and my own knowledge and I did not find any of those sufficiently mirroring the deep feelings that this sad event has elicited in my mind and in the minds of many of Bert's colleagues, including many former students and post-docs from his laboratory.

Albert Geerts provided key contributions in the field of hepatic fibrogenesis, and particularly on the biology of hepatic stellate cells. But most importantly, Bert was one of us, one of the original “young boys (and girls) working on fibrosis” as Dame Sheila Sherlock often referred to us in the late 1980's. The “young boys (and girls)” had different backgrounds, some were basic scientists, some were pathologists and some were clini-

cians, but in the end we had the same aims and language in common. In those years, the attention was mainly focused on viral hepatitis with the recent discoveries of HBV and HCV and the introduction of antiviral drugs, and research on fibrosis was still a “niche” area. We all knew each other and our gatherings at international meetings at the poster or oral sessions on fibrosis were always a pleasure, almost a joy. Although competition was strong, we were all friends and ready to exchange ideas, materials and expertise. At these gatherings it was always reassuring to see the tall figure of Bert in front of a poster or sitting in the first row of the session. His passion for discussing minor or major details of a work was difficult to hide. His comments were sharp and clear, sometimes sounding a bit aggressive, but always reflecting his love for science and his honesty and integrity. As it happens in the life of a scientist, there are ups and downs, and on few occasions I saw Bert disappointed about a manuscript that had not been accepted or a grant that was not funded. Nevertheless, Bert's enthusiasm and will to succeed were endless and I had the pleasure to see him time and time again in love with new ideas and challenges. And this love was truly contagious. This is an invaluable gift when a scientist is also an educator and a coach of a team. Bert trained several generations of young scientists and some have

gained a solid scientific reputation. Krista Rombouts worked with Bert for several years as a graduate student and then joined my laboratory. I have asked her to contribute to the writing of this obituary since, in my view, she is a typical reflection of Bert's laboratory and, every day, I have the pleasure to see how Krista's working method deeply reflects Bert's teaching.

Once I spent an afternoon with Bert, walking on a cold Belgian beach. Bert loved the sea and was an experienced sailor. At that time, Bert was 45 and had survived advanced Hodgkin disease only a few years before. He was relieved to be alive and able to sail again, but there were three things that he needed to achieve to be happy: to have a child, to build the house of his dreams and to write a book about the history of stellate cells. He achieved the first two wishes and he leaves behind two small children, Nicholas and Victoria. Unfortunately there was not the time for the book. It would have been a nice memory of the work of the "young boys" to be left to posterity. Nonetheless, Bert remains in the history of hepatology and in our minds and hearts.

- Massimo Pinzani

The first time that I met Bert was in 1992. Immunocytochemistry practice, boring for most of the students, was taught in such an enthusiastic way that even the most stubborn student would get inspired to look through the microscope. During molecular cell biology, he not only showed us all known methods but he was thrilled to explain all new innovative technologies and this was definitely his passion. With that same spirit and vivacity he could inspire everybody in the lab to join this exciting world of science, in particular his "hepatic stellate cells". Preliminary data, he could turn into a large-scale project, with funding for fellowships and equipment. Of projects sometimes still too far away to be really comprehended, he could "sell" you the idea and many, many times he brought them to fruition. What once was a very small group of collaborators, became a big team and over the years many students, foreign students and visitors had the opportunity to collaborate with him. What Bert tried to teach all of us was the necessity to build a scientific background and an important aspect of being a good researcher was then of course presenting your data at national and international congresses. Even in difficult moments, he continued tirelessly, he went on in the same direction as always, his belief in his projects and his people never wavering. Bert leaves a team of four lab administrator-technicians, 11 Ph.D students and four senior scientists and many, many other friends.

- Krista Rombouts

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I had the privilege to serve as Scientific and Administrative Secretary in the EASL Scientific Committee between 1995 and 1999 and it was really wonderful to have Bert Geerts with us. His contribution to the success of several EASL meetings was instrumental. He was a strong supporter of high quality basic science being adequately represented at EASL meetings and during our tenure as Scientific Committee members we were largely responsible for the relative over-representation of basic papers in those days, so much that Maggie Bassendine once observed that there were more mice than humans in general sessions!

Bert and I developed a strong friendship over the years inasmuch as I had no doubts who would have been ideal to join the *Journal of Hepatology* Editorial Team in 2005 as a world leading expert in cell biology and fibrosis. During his tenure as Associate Editor of this journal he was a fundamental asset to the team, supporting the role of the Journal as a forum for all subspecialties in hepatology and suggesting improvements in the structure of the journal. Stellate cells continued to be his passionate scientific priority. We often discussed papers dealing with several aspects of basic science and it was remarkable how strongly he defended the most important contributions to the field.

Bert was a real gentleman in every respect and as a gentleman discretely left all the many friends and colleagues who appreciated his kindness and intellectual honesty.

So long Bert... we shall miss you.

- Mario U. Mondelli

Mario U. Mondelli

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