



CONFERENCES

Klaas Breur award



Philip Poortmans

Institute: Iridium Kankernetwerk
Antwerp, Belgium

What is your next challenge?

I am currently focused on three main, exciting challenges: 1/ to optimise further the multidisciplinary management of breast cancer in Antwerp (Belgium); 2/ to bring the wonderful promises of ultra-high dose rate radiation delivery (FLASH) to clinical practice as quickly and effectively as possible; and 3/ to enhance my personal mentorship network to contribute to the optimal preparation of the next generation of the radiation oncology team. However, my biggest, life-long challenge is to provide quality care to my patients, and I cherish my colleagues, from the different specialities and disciplines, who help me every day with this important challenge.

What do you think are the next challenges for radiation oncologists (or radiation physicists, radiobiologists, radiotherapists, brachytherapists)?

The next challenge in radiation oncology is already ongoing, and often poorly recognised: open and clear multidisciplinary communication and collaboration with colleagues in all diagnostic and therapeutic fields of oncology! Here I see a long, challenging road ahead.

So, indeed, I don't see our main challenges as further enhancement in techniques such as imaging, implementation of artificial intelligence (AI), personalisation of therapies, or developments of new approaches such as FLASH and immunoradiotherapy combinations. Those will happen anyway, generically, as a logical development in the field of radiation oncology.

No, while we focus more on technical advancements, we tend to isolate ourselves and progressively to lose contact with other players in the multidisciplinary field and, unfortunately, also with our patients. Fortunately, in several places we have perfect examples of teamwork, but all too often we see examples of competition, open or more often hidden, exclusion, isolation and "Calimero behaviour". Even worse, I am aware of several examples of "battles" even within our own field of radiation oncology. We need to stop this, better today than tomorrow! I see a very important role for the European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology (ESTRO) in turning the tide, better sooner than later!

What does this award mean to you?

When I learned that I had been awarded the Klaas Breur Gold Medal, I felt both pride and humility. The realisation of work that leads to such recognition is not the work of a single person, it's the work of one or several teams, of which only the spokesperson can be awarded. Therefore, I want to dedicate the Klaas Breur award to all teams I have worked with, starting with our patients and including radiation oncology colleagues and the full multidisciplinary field in which I feel so at home. Finally - and I know that this is very commonly said in these situations - I couldn't have done all that I did without the support of my loved ones.

What are you most proud of in your career?

I feel very proud of my whole career, but a few highlights include: that I started all my work from a non-academic position, and that I may have been the first, even only, radiation oncologist to be elected ESTRO's president from a non-academic/categorical background; the honorary memberships and lectures that I have been awarded, including the Klaas Breur award; my successful involvement in several clinical trials, of which most continue to have a real clinical impact; the excellent integration and acceptance of breast cancer in the multidisciplinary field; my excellent contacts with patients, of whom some became precious friends; and the great satisfaction that I feel from many young colleagues whose careers I mentor, sometimes even from long distances.

If you hadn't been a scientist, what would you like to have been?

I can hardly imagine not being a doctor or scientist. I would, without doubt, choose the same career, over and over again. If, for one reason or another, this would not have been possible, I might have chosen an adventurous mixture of careers that involved a lot of travelling and exploring, with culinary and oenological aspects.

What do you do in your spare time?

In fact, if I miss one thing, it is spare time... But what I love to do, and will likely extend in the future, are sports, including swimming, diving and skiing, as well as cooking and wine tasting (I might go for an official degree in that).

When do you think you will retire, and what would you like to do then?

Retirement? Not really my thing, for sure not immediately. Yes, of course, I will follow the rules that are set by my current position, but, health and colleagues permitting, I will probably continue in several positions, including research (e.g. in FLASH radiotherapy!), teaching, mentoring, lecturing and maybe in another advisory and organisational activity.

