Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738)

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Postal Stamps issued on Hermann, Child welfare stamp Netherlands-1928 and 200th death anniversary Netherlands-1938

Hermann Boerhaave was the son of a clergyman, born in Voorhout, few miles from Leyden. He became interested in medicine, and obtained his medical degree at Harderwyck in 1693. He returned to Leyden as a physician and accelerated the process by which it became the most famous medical center in Europe, for a long time.

He was teacher extraordinaire and taught medicine by taking his students to the sick-bed and was the founder of clinical teaching. Although he was not a great investigator, nor a great writer, his success was prominent because of his simplicity, clarity and eclectic wisdom. His personal warmth, and his acute discernment at the sickbed, made him a great and beloved physician and a natural medical leader of the day. His teaching methods were sound and often revolutionary. Students flocked to Leyden from both Europe and America to hear him.

Not only was Boerhaave famous as an internist, but he was also supposed to be so popular, that church bells from Leyden once signaled his recovery from gout and jubilant crowds welcomed him to the streets, as he returned to the University. He said: "the poor are my best patients, because God pays for them".

Patients sought his consultation from far. Among them was Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia. William III, hereditary prince of Netherlands, tapped him for the position of court physician at The Hague. The University of Groningen offered him the chair of medicine. He declined each offer and remained in Leyden to teach and to practice medicine.

Boerhaave's book, Elements of Chemistry, went through many editions. He described rupture of oesophagus (Boerhaave syndrome), dilatation of the heart, suffocation from a fatty tumour of the chest and pleural inflammation in pleurisy.

Boerhaavese success in training medical pupils and apprentices, was his greatest contribution to the healing art. A Leyden graduate outranked a contestant from Oxford or Cambridge at that time. He is probably the most eminent European physician during the sixteenth centuries between Galen and Koch and is sometimes known as the Dutch Hippocrates. The success of his practice is attested by the fact that he died an extremely wealthy man.