PHILOSOPHY OF MEDICINE IN THE NETHERLANDS*

ABSTRACT. This report explores the relationship between philosophy and medicine in the Netherlands. In Section 1 we outline the ups and downs of medico-philosophical research in our country: pre-war flourishing, post-war decline, and modern renaissance. In Section 2 we review recent Dutch literature in the philosophy of medicine. The topics dealt with include methodology of medical science, alternative medicine, the basic concepts of medicine, anthropological medicine, medicalization, medicine and culture, and health care ethics.

Key words: The Netherlands, Philosophy of medicine, Scientific medicine, Concept of disease, Alternative medicine, Methodology of medicine, Health care ethics, Health policy, Abortion, Euthanasia, Medical experimentation.

0. INTRODUCTION

Since 1970s there has been a marked increase of interest in the philosophy of medicine in the Netherlands. The scope of this article is the past seventy years of philosophy of medicine in our country accentuating the evolution in the last two decades.

As in other countries there have been two streams in the development of medical philosophy in the Netherlands: medical ethics practised by theologians and moral philosophers, and philosophical studies, devoted to concepts, theories and methodologies of medicine, by physicians. At the moment these streams have actually flowed together because of educational and organizational developments, and because of the need to co-ordinate dispersed and disparate research activities.

The present essay is an attempt to give a general view of the recent evolution and modern state of the discussions in this field of philosophy of medicine. Owing to the quantity and range of the literature, as well as to the amazing variety of present-day activities, no attempt at completeness can be made. We can only give our own reconstruction of the developments, the disadvantage of this approach being mitigated by the fact that our views are influenced by those of our colleagues in the field.

1. A PANORAMIC VIEW


In the medical literature in the first half of this century, several publications
have appeared of a more or less contemplative or philosophical nature. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s a substantial number of philosophy-orientated articles was published. This is a sign of the general upsurge of interest in the philosophy of medicine all over Europe. In the Netherlands, most activities in this field had two characteristics: philosophical reflection on medicine was almost exclusively the work of physicians, with no co-operation or connection whatever by professional philosophers; furthermore, philosophy of medicine in this period was principally influenced by medical philosophers from German-speaking countries. Present-day philosophy of medicine has lost these pre-war characteristics. It is quite remarkable, however, that the same topics which are vehemently discussed nowadays, can be found in these older publications:

1.1.1. Scientific and Alternative Medicine

In 1914 a special and enlarged edition of the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* has been devoted to the question of the monopoly in healing, held by university educated physicians, and the freedom of the patient to be treated by a healer of his own choice. In this issue several authors philosophize about the nature of scientific medicine as distinguished from alternative methods of treatment. Pekelharing (1914) emphasizes the difference between the science and the art of medicine; as long as medicine is ruled by preconceived, so-called philosophical ideas (as in homeopathy or mesmerism), no progress is made. Even as an art, medicine can only make objective progress in the struggle against diseases, if founded on the rockbottom of the natural sciences. The same positivistic conviction is defended by others (Winkler 1914; Van Valkenburg 1936). De Feyfer (1926) however, explains the philosophical, particularly Kantian, background of homeopathy; he is of the opinion that the history of medicine is really a concatenation of philosophically grounded systems.

1.1.2. Methodology of Medicine

Burgerhout (1939) criticized the notion, usual in medicine, of causality, as representing a deterministic law of succession; he proposed a probabilistic account of causality. Sikkel (1916) reflected on the role of experience and speculation in medical theory and practice, and Van der Horst (1925) described the importance of teleological thinking in medicine; he pointed out that there were two ways of knowing in medical science: (1) analytic knowledge and causal explanation; and (2) synthetic knowledge and teleological explanation. He criticized scientific medicine for preferring only the first way of knowing: medicine could become a real science of man by considering the patient as an integrated whole and by looking for the meaning of phenomena and not only