

Laudatio prof. dr. Bert Brunekreef

Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellencies,
Members of the Board of the Heineken Foundation and the Alfred Heineken Fondsen
Foundation, in particular their Chair, Mrs. De Carvalho,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Professor Brunekreef,

On your personal webpage on the website of your employer, Utrecht University, you write:
“I have been inspired since the mid-1970s by the relationship between environmental factors and public health. This relationship had been exaggerated, underestimated, ignored, denied and incorrectly represented at various times by various parties. The environmental epidemiologist’s job is to offer society a solid scientific basis for setting priorities in pollution reduction.”

This quotation bears witness to a commitment to society that is undoubtedly one of the mainsprings of your work as a top scientist. Your research into the relationship between environmental factors and public health has led you to draw pioneering conclusions. You began to question the health effects of home insulation during the oil crisis, when it became customary for home owners to insulate their homes. You were the one who demonstrated that children living in a damp home with mildew are much more likely to develop asthma. You also showed a close association between dust mite allergies and the quality of the air in the home. Your PIAMA research – The Prevention and Incidence of Asthma and Mite Allergy – garnered you worldwide acclaim.

But you are also a major influence when it comes to the outdoor environment. For example, you investigated the impact of air pollution on children’s health, demonstrating with your highly precise epidemiological studies that air pollution does indeed have a huge effect on public health, both indoors and in urban outdoor environments.

Professor Brunekreef, your receipt of the internationally prestigious Heineken Prize for Environmental Sciences is entirely appropriate, because your research is equally internationally prestigious and you are regarded worldwide as an authority in the environmental sciences. Your epidemiological findings and analyses have been used time and again to set the standard for the protection of public health. Your research paved the way for the first Air Quality Standard for PM10 (fine particle pollution) by the US Environmental Protection Agency, and it forms the basis for European Union legislation in that area. It is a basis that you have defended with scientific arguments. For example, you succeeded in persuading the European Commission not to lower the standards for the amount of fine particle pollution regarded as acceptable for human health.

You continue your fight against air pollution by offering solicited and unsolicited advice of this kind. Your underlying assumption is that your advice will carry weight if it is backed up scientifically. That is demonstrated by your scientific achievements, proof of which can be found in your many prestigious publications and your school of PhD candidates and graduates. All this means you make excellent work of being an “honest broker”. You were a member of the World Health Organisation advisory committee for health and air pollution in Europe, and you are currently a member of a committee set up by the Netherlands Health Council. You also have a seat on the Steering Committee of the International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood.

You studied environmental hygiene at Wageningen University, where you specialised in air

pollution and the relationship between environment and health. After receiving your PhD, you spent a year at the Harvard School of Public Health. You were appointed professor of Environmental Epidemiology at Wageningen University in 1993 and at Utrecht University in 2000. In 2005, you founded the Institute for Risk Assessment Sciences at Utrecht University, and you are still the institute's director.

Your intellectual leadership, your key role in the field of environmental epidemiology, and the enormous influence of your work in the area of public health and environmental protection are all outstanding reasons to pay tribute to you here this afternoon.

Professor Brunekreef, on behalf of the Jury for the Heineken Prize for Environmental Sciences, it is my great pleasure to present the 2008 prize to you as a gesture of appreciation for your contribution to environmental epidemiology and your research into the relationship between environmental factors and public health.

Prof. dr. Gert Jan van Heijst,
Chair of the jury of the Dr. A.H. Heineken Prize for Environmental Sciences 2008