

FAMILY PLANNING PIONEERS

JOHANNES RUTGERS (1850-1924)

By Evert Ketting*



Johannes Rutgers is less well known than his famous female contemporary and family planning pioneer, Aletta Jacobs, who opened the first family planning clinic in the world, and was the first female medical doctor in the Netherlands. Still, the Dutch FPA bears Johannes Rutgers' name, and of course not without good reason. Aletta Jacobs was first of all a radical feminist and secondly a medical doctor. She fought for women's rights in general, and as a medical doctor she did all she could to convince other medical doctors they should provide family planning services. But she could not accept 'lay people' playing a prominent role in the family planning movement, and therefore remained more or less an outsider to this movement, where doctors were a very small minority. Rutgers, on the other hand, was the ideologist, the organiser, the leader and the spokesperson of the family planning movement during its infant years.

Rutgers was born in 1850, the son of a protestant minister, and he was predestined to follow his father's footsteps. But his life would take a radically different turn. After graduating from the gymnasium, he studied theology at the University of Groningen. In 1874, one week after his marriage, he was sent as a minister to the small peasant community of Hornhuizen in the far north of the Netherlands. But he could not settle down, and left after one and a half years. He felt isolated, and after the birth of his first child, he went through a deep crisis of faith. Although he never lost his faith, he concluded he was not suitable for the ministry. Rutgers then went back to university to study medicine, which he finished in 1879 and

then settled in Rotterdam as a general practitioner. In 1884 his wife died, leaving the young doctor with three small children. A year later he asked Mietje Hoitsema, the head of a girl's high school, to marry him and "to take pity on his family". Mietje and Johannes agreed to remain childless, which was an extraordinarily unusual decision at the time.

The couple Rutgers-Hoitsema became politically active in the socialist and anarchist movement, but Rutgers could not openly pursue his socialist ideals. In a letter to the leader of the socialist movement in 1893 he wrote: "If I annoy my patients too much, I will soon end up earning nothing anymore. Practising only for the poor people would be gratifying, but the poor get treatment without payment. We have already sacrificed much comfort and pleasure". Nevertheless, Rutgers gradually became more radical in his opinions. In 1894 he published his version of a utopian society, called "Anno 1999", which now looks extremely naive, but which demonstrated Rutgers' idealism.

Initially, Rutgers had openly opposed family planning, but particularly through the death of his first wife, who had four deliveries in seven years, he changed his mind. Furthermore, his second wife, who was an active feminist and friend of Aletta Jacobs, most probably influenced him. His thoughts on the position and role of women in society changed radically. But also his experience as a general practitioner convinced him of the necessity to supply family planning services. In 1892 he joined the 'Neo-Malthusian League', that had been founded in 1881, after the example of Drysdale's 'Malthusian League' in England. The primary aim of the league was "the distribution of knowledge on the law of population". During its first years, the league had been extremely careful not to explicitly mention methods of contraception, but in 1884 it published a booklet called "The means for the prevention of large families" (popularly known as the "meansbooklet"), which sold 300,000 copies in the next 50 years.

In 1901 Rutgers became the secretary of the Neo-Malthusian League, and his wife, Mietje Hoitsema, President. The couple in fact took over the organisation and ran it for two decades until Rutgers resigned from the board in 1919. Under the strong leadership of Mietje and Johannes the League flourished under oppression and the membership increased from about 500 to almost 7000. This growth was largely due to Rutgers' dedication and fighting spirit.

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Interestingly, Rutgers never believed in the social theory of Malthusianism, the official philosophy of the League. He did not accept Malthusianism as an alternative to socialism (he remained a socialist all his life), but he felt people should have access to family planning in order to become masters of their natural condition. His primary motive to promote family planning was not the reduction of family size as a means to create a more prosperous society, it was instead the liberation of sexuality. An impressive number of publications on topics like love, male and female sexuality, and homosexuality in several languages display his main interest. He firmly believed people could, and should, freely take responsibility of their own sexuality, and in that sense he was far ahead of his time.

Only twenty years after his death in 1926, the Neo-Malthusian League changed its name to Netherlands' Association for Sexual Reform (NVSH), thereby posthumously turning itself to the philosophy Rutgers had really believed in. And finally, in 1969, when the services bureaux of the NVSH were brought together in a new independent organisation, Johannes Rutgers was honoured by giving it his name: the Rutgers Stichting.

Bibliography

The most relevant source for this article has been:

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