

Scientist killed on MH17 brought HIV therapy to the poor

Research community mourns Joep Lange, who was among the passengers of Malaysia Airlines flight shot down over Ukraine.

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Mertijn Doormestik/Hollandse Hoogte/eyevine

Joep Lange's death on the downed Malaysia Airlines flight shocked the international public health and medical research communities.

"Why is it," Joep Lange told an International AIDS Conference in the early 2000s, "that we are always talking about the problem of drug distribution, when there is virtually no place in Africa where one cannot get a cold beer or a cold Coca-Cola."

The Dutch clinical virologist — who was among the [298 passengers who died in the downing of a Malaysia Airlines flight](#) on 17 July, and one of many headed to the 20th International AIDS Conference in Melbourne, Australia — worked since the early 1990s to deliver HIV drugs deep into the world's poorest countries. Between 2002 and 2004, he served as president of the International AIDS Society, which organizes the annual meeting, among the largest and most important in the HIV research community.

In 1996, Lange co-founded a clinical-trial network in Thailand to test the feasibility of providing antiretroviral drugs to HIV patients in low- and middle-income countries. The [HIV Netherlands Australia Thailand Research Collaboration](#), known as HIV-NAT, has since completed 68 studies and was among the earliest research efforts to establish that antiretroviral drugs that attack HIV can be cheaply and effectively delivered in resource-poor settings such as Thailand.

Lange was a clinical virologist at the University of Amsterdam. His research [explored HIV drug resistance, the role of antiretroviral drugs in preventing transmission](#) from mother to child and other issues related to managing HIV/AIDS. His research helped to establish the safety and effectiveness of treating patients with multiple antiviral drugs, which is now standard. He co-founded the journal *Antiviral Therapy* and advised several drug companies on antivirals.

In 2000, Lange helped to launch a not-for-profit organization in Amsterdam called the PharmAccess Foundation to bring antiretroviral

drugs to sub-Saharan Africa, where the HIV epidemic was in full swing and most patients still went untreated. The effort started with a modest, yet novel idea: treating employees of the Dutch beer-maker Heineken (an early supporter of PharmAccess) and their dependants in sub-Saharan Africa. The foundation has since broadened its reach, creating a fund that subsidizes health insurance (which pays for antiretroviral drugs) for about 100,000 people in Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya.

"I am privileged to have been Joep's colleague for more than two decades," said David Cooper, an AIDS researcher at the University of New South Wales in Sydney who also co-founded HIV-NAT, [on the website The Conversation](#). "His contribution to HIV research and treatment, and his determination to ensure access to those treatments for people in Africa and Asia, cannot be underestimated."

Onno Schellekens, the managing director of PharmAccess, said in [a statement posted to the organization's website](#): "This is a massive loss. We are devastated. Joep's dedication to the treatment of HIV/Aids and global health in general has been groundbreaking. With the support of many public and private organizations, most notably the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he has played an invaluable role in the international global health community."

Reached at the AIDS meeting in Melbourne, Charles Boucher, a virologist at Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, told *Nature*: "I've worked with Lange for 30 years. I know him from medical school. He was a year ahead of me. I did my PhD with him. I watched him grow from a clinician who was taking care of patients in the early 1980s to a national leader who was leading our country in Europe in developing new drugs, evaluating new drugs and changing the paradigms of clinical trials. From there he moved to international research, to Africa, and became well-known there."

"He was working on everything from the virus to the global epidemic — the care issues, the cost issues, the economics. He was quite exceptional in his reach. He cared about the science and the epidemic. I'm not sure there are many such people out there at the moment," Boucher added.

"He was very selfless," says Robin Weiss, a virologist at University College London. "He believed we've made great scientific progress and people have to benefit from it."

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