

Research by UM students in Ethiopian prisons

TB carried on a cold wind

It's not something that goes unnoticed: two young, white women handing out questionnaires in prisons in Ethiopia to gauge inmates' knowledge of tuberculosis. "You hear constantly: 'Baby, I love you. Please marry me!'"

It was late February when four UM researchers showed up at the prison in Wukro, northern Ethiopia. A bizarre experience, says Mark Spigt, associate professor of General Practice Medicine and one of the visitors. "When you see photos, the first thing that comes to mind is a marketplace or a refugee camp. The prisoners are not locked up; instead they can wander around freely in a courtyard bordered by sleeping barracks. You've got murderers and rapists, but when we arrived the gate was wide open. There was a guard on duty, but still. You can't help but wonder how often prisoners escape. And the rules aren't always strictly observed. In theory we had to hand over our phones on entry – but if you didn't want to for some reason you could just as easily not bother."

Spigt, who with his colleague Professor Geert-Jan Dinant has long had ties with the local University of Mekelle, recently supervised research on TB in nine prisons in northern Ethiopia. These prisons are hotbeds for Mycobacterium tuberculosis, as the pathogen is known: the prevalence of TB is four times higher in the jails than in the population at large; in the east of the country, as much as eight times. This poses a real risk: the guards and visitors as well as inmates can easily come into contact with the bacterium, with all the consequences that entails for wider society. Half of the prisoners are unaware that they are carriers of the bacterium. The Ethiopian researcher Kelemework Adane, who will obtain his PhD in Maastricht, has trained prisoners in recognising the signs of TB. Tell-tale signs are a cough that lingers for more than two weeks, but also weight loss and fever. Because the bacterium thrives in a weakened immune system, the condition often occurs in combination with HIV. But how much do prisoners actually know about TB? This is what the two master's students, Johanna Laturnus (30) and Noortje Dorscheidt (23), aimed to find out. In March they visited four prisons in the Tigray region, disseminating 270 questionnaires with a total of 40 questions on the causes of TB, as well as its spread, treat-



UM researchers and students visit the Wukro prison in Ethiopia Photo: Geert-Jan Dinant

ment and effects. Easier said than done, since many prisoners are illiterate and may speak any one of the 81 dialects found in the country. For this reason, the prisoners trained by Adane

conducted the interviews.

"The results showed that three quarters of the inmates have next to no knowledge about TB and what you can do about it", says Dorscheidt.

"Only 40 percent realise it's bacterial. A quarter think it's caused by cold wind. This is a well-known Ethiopian misconception, but it's not clear where it comes from. Either way, it's not ideal because it means people often keep their windows closed to stave off this 'cold wind', when good ventilation is the very thing that's advisable. Also not ideal is the fact that less than half are aware that they can get the antibiotics to treat TB for free. One in five don't bother seeking treatment because of the cost."

That being said, one should not expect too much of the medical facilities in the prisons. "They have quite a decent stock of medication, but there's hardly any equipment. Anyone with severe symptoms is allowed to go to the hospital. In Mekelle, a big bus with barred windows comes around once a week to collect the prisoners in their blue overalls."

Dorscheidt rarely felt unsafe, with the possible exception of that time in the courtyard in Wukro (see photo). With herself and her three colleagues surrounded by hundreds of prisoners, the thought occurred to her: what would happen if one of them did something unexpected and the whole group got caught up in the moment? "In any event, you're certainly an attraction. It could have been a long time since they'd seen a woman at all, let alone a white one. You definitely feel a thousand eyes on you, especially as you make your way around the prisoners. Then you hear constantly: 'Baby, I love you. Please marry me!'"

Maurice Timmermans

No general master's selection

There will be no general selection for master's students at this university, says a written statement from the Executive Board to the University Council. The Council agrees with the position taken by the Board.

The matter became a topic of interest since the Quality in Diversity Act was introduced by education minister Bussemaker. She abolished the system of the 'continuing master's programmes' in 2013, referring to master's programmes that are open to every student who completed the respective preparatory bachelor's programmes.

National student union ISO now fears a domino effect: when additional requirements are set for potential master's students on a large scale, one university after the other will have to implement the same policy as well. Otherwise the institute that maintains a freely accessible master's programme runs the risk of becoming a litterbin for the others, ISO reported in a pressing letter to the minister in January. Such an effect is certainly not visible yet, says the Executive Board. There are a couple of universities (Utrecht, Rotterdam) that indeed have already made their master's programmes selective, but this does not apply elsewhere. So there is no

'overspill' of students who are not welcome elsewhere. The Board has therefore decided, after conferring with the deans, to leave the situation as it is. This means that every bachelor's programme will continue to give access to one or more master's programmes. "In doing so, we indicate how we appreciate the quality of our bachelor's programmes," says the statement to the University Council. Only for the research master's and certain 'small' programmes, students will be subjected to a selection procedure. This is also a continuation of existing policies.

WB

"Surprise hit at WUN congress: international classroom"

A top-class conference, one might say: four hundred academics from all corners of the world, spending a week debating subjects of interest for the whole world. Migration of course, but also health care, climate change and emerging economies.

Guests were the eighteen universities connected to WUN, the Worldwide Universities Network. This network covers eleven countries, from Ghana to Hong Kong. The conference was held in Maastricht this year – from 2 to 7 April – because of the UM's fortieth anniversary. The UM, the only Dutch university, became a member in 2013.

Some parts, such as the so-called China Workshop, took place in Brussels. "After the attacks on the airport and the metro, a crisis meeting was held," says policy adviser Alexandra Rosenbach, also institutional WUN co-ordinator. "There are so many speakers involved in such a workshop that you can't move it to Maastricht at the last moment. Besides, the immediate threat had gone in Brussels."



Lunch at WUN conference, in the mensa Tongersestraat Photo: Loraine Bodewes

A surprise hit, according to Rosenbach, was the session on the international classroom, where all advantages and disadvantages were discussed, which brings a mix of nationalities with it.

"Experiments are not just being carried out in Maastricht but also in Australia and Canada. We don't need to reinvent everything in Maastricht. Enthusiasm during the meeting was huge. Defi-

nite follow-up sessions have also been agreed upon."

Maurice Timmermans