Lessons in courage from the past: lest we forget
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New Zealand, Aotearoa or ‘Land of the long white cloud’: Attention on the nomenclature of this country has tended to focus in recent years on moves towards inclusion of Māori terminology. Originally called Staten Landt by Dutch Seaman Abel Tasman in 1642, this was subsequently changed over time to the Latin Nova Zeelandia, the Dutch Nieuw Zeeland and finally the English New Zealand. However, more attention to its European namesake origins as a Dutch province provides an often overlooked link to the Netherlands that may be of interest to physicians and health sector employees.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons that can be learned from this link to the Netherlands is the inspiring example of an almost united front presented by Dutch physicians to Nazi occupation in World War II. Although revisionist historians have challenged the depth of Dutch resistance to Nazi occupation, the response of Dutch physicians remains both emotive and instructive.

Although the timeline from German invasion (10 May 1940) until the surrender of the Netherlands (14 May 1940) was a mere five days, resistance in the medical profession continued to grow throughout the war. Alexander provides a concise summary of their resistance:

There is no doubt that in Germany itself, the first and foremost effective step... was the propaganda barrage... It is to the everlasting honor of the medical profession of Holland that they recognized the earliest and most subtle phases of this attempt and rejected it. When Seiss-Inquart, Reich Commissar... wanted to draw the Dutch physicians into the orbit of the medical profession...he couched his order in the most careful and superficially acceptable terms...The physicians of Holland rejected this order unanimously because they saw what it actually meant...Although on the surface, the order appeared not too grossly unacceptable, the Dutch physicians decided that it was the first, although slight, step away from principle that is the most important one. The Dutch physicians declared that they would not obey this order. When Seiss-Inquart threatened them with revocation of their licenses, they returned their licenses, removed their shingles, and while seeing their own patients secretly, no longer wrote birth or death certificates. Seiss-Inquart retraced his steps and tried to cajole them – still to no effect. Then he arrested 100 Dutch physicians and sent them to concentration camps. The medical profession remained adamant and quietly took care of their widows and orphans, but would not give in. Thus, it came about that not a single euthanasia or non-therapeutic sterilization was recommended or participated in by any Dutch physician. They had the foresight to resist before the first step was taken, and they acted unanimously and won out in the end.

In examining the future of Public Health over 80 years ago, Emerson remarked on the ‘the necessity for courage as well as
knowledge, for the will-to-do’. The example presented by Dutch physicians must not be forgotten. It is all too easy to fall into a habit of self-surveillance and self-censorship. The professional and personal costs of speaking out are significant, and can result in repercussions. However, despite the challenges that face us we are not powerless. Evidence suggests an alarmingly widespread retreat from activism in various branches of the health sector. Therefore we must emulate the Dutch physicians and strive for courage and solidarity in combating injustice and health and social inequalities.

References: