Jon van Rood Medal Award
July 21 2017, Jon van Rood passed away. Van Rood was one of the founders of the Dutch Society for Immunology (NVVI). He has had an influence on transplantation immunology that is beyond understanding. His pioneering work on HLA has guided the field. To highlight the important role of Jon van Rood for the field of immunology and the NVVI, last year the Society decided on a Jon van Rood Medal Award for persons who have made an extraordinary contribution to the field of immunology in the Netherlands. Jon van Rood himself agreed to associate his name with this award.

Rob Benner receives first Jon van Rood Medal
"I am a teacher by nature"
The first person to receive the Jon van Rood Medal is emeritus professor dr. Rob Benner, former head of the Department of Immunology at Erasmus MC in Rotterdam. Professor Benner was instrumental in the scientific development of the field of immunology and in the growth of the Department in Rotterdam. Yet it was not always evident that he would become a prominent professor. "I am a teacher by nature", he stresses.

Already as a biology and chemistry student, Rob Benner had a teaching job at a Rotterdam highschool. His heart was in it, and he always thought he would have a career in teaching biology and chemistry. "My professors, however, showed disdain for this ambition. "If you're not good enough to be a researcher, you can always become a teacher", they said. So, I wanted to prove to them that I did not want to become a teacher by default and decided to do a Ph.D. first."

Antibody production in bone marrow
By then, the die had been cast. In the year 1971 Benner got a position at the labs of cell biologists/immunologists professors Vos and Van Muiswinkel in Rotterdam. He was inspired by the research of professor Hijmans, who believed that the bone marrow is the major site of long-term antibody production. There was, however, no proof in animal research that supported the hypothesis of Hijmans. Benner proved in systematic experiments with mice that Hijmans' hypothesis was correct and that antibody formation in the bone marrow always required secondary immunisation. It was a sensation, because at the time the bone marrow was considered to be the place where a.o. old plasma cells were broken down, not the place where antibodies originated from. Subsequently Benner's team discovered the underlying mechanism: the migration of reactivated memory B cells from elsewhere towards the bone marrow, to further mature there to plasma cells with a long life span.

Jon van Rood
By the end of the seventies, Benner's name had been established. Also, immunology as a field started to get momentum. In 1978/1979, Benner worked at the Basel Institute for Immunology, under professor Niels Kaj Jerne. End 1979, Queen Juliana appointed Benner as a full professor in Immunology in Rotterdam. "Whenever I applied for a subsidy, I would get it. Times were different then", Benner recalls. By the time, Jon van Rood had become one of the founders of the Leiden Institute for Immunology. The Board consisted mostly of groupleads from Leiden, but Rob Benner was also a member. "Leiden and Rotterdam kept each other up to date on their respective research. We met on a monthly basis, so I got to know Jon van Rood well. He was an inspiring, clear, binding and respectful leader", he says. In 1985 the Academic Hospital Rotterdam, together with the Erasmus University, decided to found a Department of Immunology and was looking for a Head of the Department. The Department would encompass research, patient care and education. Originally, the clinicians of the hospital were of the opinion that the Department should be managed by a medical doctor. The Board of the hospital, however, turned to 'the best immunologist in The Netherlands', Jon van Rood, for advice. He insisted that they should appoint Rob Benner and thus was decided.

All disciplines in one Department
As from Day 1, the Department of Immunology has aimed at performing cutting edge research, participating in patient care by performing immunodiagnostics and supporting clinical immunology, and performing a wide range of educational activities. Research encompasses basic, translational and clinical immunology. Its focuses span molecular to clinical immunology. “In quite an early stage I insisted that it would be important to have all these disciplines together in one Department; not only can one efficiently use the facilities, but more importantly researchers can inspire each other and learn from each other. This has in fact resulted in really successful immunology groups at the Erasmus MC.” Also, upto this date, the Department commits itself to excellence and active engagement in teaching and education, Rob Benner's passion. “The passion I had as Head of the Department for education, certainly inspired others to give it their best. It's not just something you have to do, it's crucial to recruit talented young people and to raise the bar for achievements in immunology.”

Paul Dieges
Rob Benner was a board member of the Dutch Society for Immunology (NVVI) from 1993-2001. Together with Mo Daha and Georg Kraal and supported by many others he established the section Medical Immunology and the section Clinical Immunology within the Society. He refers to Dr. Paul Dieges, a visionary allergologist who organized a congress on clinical immunology and allergology in the eighties. “At the time, the field of clinical immunology was hardly recognised and the link with allergies was very weak. Few people suspected the congress to become a success. Yet it was a huge success, resulting in a profit of 1,5 million guilders. Half of this fortune Dieges donated to the NVVI and half to the Dutch Society for Allergology. This explains why the NVVI could organize so many activities with low entrance fees, enabling the Society to develop itself strongly.”

Doing things together
Rob Benner retired from the Department in the year 2013. Looking back at 45 years of immunology, he says: “What's important – besides having all disciplines under one roof – is to have excellent researchers in your team. I was very lucky to have not only excellent basic researchers, but also talented clinical scientists in the Department. But it's equally important that their qualities are matched by capable technicians and supporting staff, people with a binding character and great loyalty to the Department as a whole, who take pleasure in supporting the scientists regardless of the research group they belong to. It's these people who determine the quality of the organization in the long term. Our work is all about doing things together, inspiring each other, learning from each other. It's the essence of immunology; you can't do it alone.”

Future
In the near future, Benner expects clinical immunology to become even more important. “Yet”, he says, “we must never forget that it's good basic research that enables breakthroughs in clinical immunology. There needs to be a balance. Through the techological developments, clinical immunology is growing closer to medical immunology. Yet for the interpretation of clinical outcomes, medical immunology will remain indispensible.” He concludes on a personal note: “My work as a teacher, scientist and Head of Department has been deeply rewarding. Also, I have always cherished my family, our garden and our travels. My wife Diet and I have been married for 45 years now. Our children and their families have a prominent place in our lives, and we love them with all our hearts. New developments!”