

NEWS

In memoriam: Steven Boonen 1962–2013

Roger Bouillon

Clinic and Laboratory of Experimental Medicine and Endocrinology, Gasthuisberg, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium.

IBMS BoneKEy 10, Article number: 385 (2013) | doi:10.1038/bonekey.2013.119; published online 31 July 2013

A tribute to the life and work of Steven Boonen

Professor Steven Boonen died suddenly at the age of 50 on 20th May 2013 while attending the meeting of the European Calcified Tissue Society in Lisbon. He is survived by his wife Anne and daughter Annelien.

Steven obtained his MD degree from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 1987 *magna cum laude* and completed his residency in internal medicine in Leuven. Subsequently, he trained in clinical gerontology and geriatric medicine in London at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, between 1992 and 1993. In 1993 he joined the medical staff of the Leuven University, Department of Internal Medicine. Between 1995 and 1996, he held research appointments at the Loma Linda University in California (with Dr David Baylink) and University College, London (with Professor Alan Boyde). In 1997 he was appointed as medical director of the Leuven University Centre for Metabolic Bone Diseases, a multidisciplinary initiative of Endocrinology, Rheumatology, Geriatric Medicine, Gynaecology, Physical Medicine and Surgery, and set up a dedicated single entry outpatient service for patients with metabolic bone diseases. In 1998 he successfully defended his PhD thesis, entitled 'The pathogenesis of age-related (type II) osteoporosis: *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies on determinants of femoral bone quality'. The same year he was appointed as associate professor of medicine at the Department of Experimental Medicine of the Leuven University Faculty of Medicine, followed by a full professorship of gerontology and geriatric medicine in 2004. In 2008 he was appointed as head of the Clinical Division of Geriatric Medicine of the Leuven University Hospital Department of Internal Medicine. He was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Medicine (Belgium) in 2012.

From early in his career Steven embraced the difficult combination of clinical practice and clinical/translational research and became a highly successful clinician-scientist. This combination was made possible by his appointment to a University Chair in Metabolic Bone Diseases and a senior clinical research post funded by the National Fund for Scientific Research (FWO Vlaanderen). His translational and clinical research activities focused on determinants of age-related skeletal fragility and strategies to reduce fracture risk. He paid particular attention to the study of musculoskeletal diseases of



the 'oldest-old'. One of his conclusions was that many therapeutic interventions shown to be beneficial in the elderly were even more effective in the oldest-old, with a lower number needed to treat, and that therapeutic nihilism for this age group could not be justified.

He combined excellent clinical care and leadership of a large clinical service with an exceptional research output, producing more than 120 publications in the *Journal of Bone and Mineral Research*, and numerous publications in the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, *Osteoporosis International*, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Lancet*, and *New England Journal of Medicine*. In 2012 alone he was an author on more than 50 publications. His productivity was accompanied by exceptional 'time management' so that his family, co-workers and patients never saw him stressed; each evening his office was perfectly tidied in preparation for the next day. He was a wonderful and engaging teacher and in great demand by students as a lecturer. In international meetings his exceptional qualities as a speaker were rapidly recognised. He was a regular contributor as speaker, session moderator and meet-the-professor presenter not only at the annual American Society for Bone and Mineral Research (ASBMR) meeting but also at many other major international meetings.

Steven served as an advisor on numerous boards and committees. He was a founding member of the ASBMR Working Group on Musculoskeletal Rehabilitation, and a principal investigator and member of the Project Coordinating Committee of the European Male Ageing Study (EMAS)—a large-scale prospective population-based survey to identify the consequences of physiological ageing and to explore their relationships with endocrine function. He also served on the Executive Board of the European Union Geriatric Medicine Society, on the faculty of the annual International Osteoporosis Foundation Advanced Training Course on osteoporosis and was recently elected to the Board of the European Calcified Tissue Society. He received numerous awards and I had the privilege to present to him the prestigious Belgian Antoine Faes award just 2 months before his sudden death. During that celebration in the presence of his family members and many colleagues he presented his 'life plan' to improve the care for the rapidly growing number of elderly people, using his preferred terminology of the 'oldest-old'. In this he emphasised the importance both of quality of life in old age and of a dignified and peaceful death (as in the real sense of Schopenhauer's 'eu-thanasia'). Under his leadership at Leuven University Hospital better treatment outcomes were achieved for the elderly, using interdisciplinary care teams and implementation of research-based strategies. He energised his co-workers, attended to their concerns, and above all he shared with them the success that was achieved. With Steven leading the team innovation, creativity and efficiency were combined with warm friendship.

Steven recognised that taking care of the elderly inspires broader philosophical and ethical reflections on the value of life. He regularly read and discussed philosophical treatises.

Scientific discussion of the formidable complexity of life convinced him of a supra-human power transcending human understanding of biology and life, citing Dietrich Bonhoeffer; 'Knowledge does not destroy the secret but deepens it.'

I had the exceptional privilege to meet Steven when he was still a young medical trainee and to guide, together with Jan Dequeker, his first steps on the path of clinical and basic research. He soon became a friend and later a highly respected colleague. It is sad that the person who worked so hard to improve the quality of life of the oldest-old will not himself enjoy the pleasure of living into old age. Throughout his professional career Steven always managed to find the right balance between his work and his family. He had many dreams for the future, one of which was to spend his retirement at the seaside where he was born, in the company of his beloved family. There are no words to comfort adequately his wife Anne, his daughter Annelien, his mother, brother and sister and all his family. The only consolation we can convey is that we are all immensely proud of Steven's many achievements as a warm and caring person, a teacher and a clinician-scientist. He himself wrote more than 20 years ago a poetic text in Flemish that can be translated as follows: *'If some day may come that death takes me away from you, then let no sadness fill your heart, but remember all those years when love could grow and your eyes brought me sunshine....'*

Steven was a really good man. He inspired all who knew him and leaves a lasting legacy to our community.

This obituary was written on behalf of Bouillon's close friends Dirk Vanderschueren, Annemieke Verstuyf and Wim Tambreur, and all members of the team of Geriatrics and Endocrinology and his colleagues from the University Hospitals and the Faculty of Medicine, KU Leuven, Belgium.