

‘We hope other people will follow our example’

Clemens de Vos and Ditsy de Vos-Thijssen are supporting research on combatting tick- and insect-borne diseases with a fund of their own. ‘This makes us happy.’

TEXT ANJA JANSSEN PHOTOGRAPHY FRED VAN DE HEETKAMP

PhD candidate Antoine Cribellier improved the design of a mosquito trap so that it now catches about three times as many malaria-carrying mosquitoes as the original trap. This is an example of the Wageningen research that the De Vos Fund has co-financed in recent years. The generous donors behind the fund are Clemens de Vos and Ditsy de Vos-Thijssen from Wageningen. Five years ago, they decided that they wanted to donate money to a number of good causes during their lifetime. ‘We have both worked hard for this,’ says Ditsy. Clemens with his IT firm Epicenter and Ditsy in education. ‘Sadly, we don’t have children, so we don’t need to save money for them.’ They decided on the Dutch Brain Foundation (the Hersenstichting) and a fund of their own under the auspices of the University Fund Wageningen. Clemens: ‘We didn’t study in Wageningen but we have been living here for over 20 years and we feel a bond with the town and the university. My brother works there as a researcher, we have neighbours who work there, and we hear a lot about the research.’ They chose to set up a named fund, with the aim of supporting research on combatting tick- and insect-borne diseases such as malaria, the Zika virus and Lyme’s dis-

ease. ‘Because that research goes on at the point where biology and health meet,’ says Clemens.

The couple have a say in the choice of research topics and the researchers update them annually on the results. Clemens: ‘It is nice to be able to pick something that appeals to you.’

PHD RESEARCH

Since 2015, the fund has donated a total of 50,000 euros to research on diseases transmitted by vectors such as insects and ticks. ‘With that money we supported four PhD research projects which were beyond the scope of the PhD students’ project budget,’ says Wageningen mosquito expert Sander Koenraad, who is on the fund’s supervisory board.

‘As an example, Cribellier is a biomechanical scientist and has used high-speed cameras to film the flight behaviour of mosquitoes around the trap,’ Koenraad goes on. ‘In the footage he saw how mosquitoes get away from the suction effect of the trap. By factoring that in, he could design better traps.’

Koenraad: ‘As a researcher, you make a plan for four years, but sometimes you find out as you go along that you’d like to change direction slightly and you need



Mosquito expert Sander Koenraadt (right) explains his research to Clemens de Vos and Ditsy de Vos Thijssen of the De Vos Fund.

extra funding for that. This fund makes that possible. And it is also very nice for a young researcher aiming at an academic career to be able to put on his CV that he has independently secured substantial funding.'

TICK-BORNE DISEASES

The first research that Clemens and Ditsy co-financed was that of tick researcher Helen Esser. She has now graduated with her PhD thesis on the influence of biodiversity on the transmission of diseases by ticks in Panama. She used the money to identify ticks with the aid of advanced molecular techniques. 'Helen gave very enthusiastic accounts of her research,' recalls Ditsy. 'I learned a lot in the process. I didn't know anything about ticks. Now I know that large ruminants are important for the transmission of tick diseases to humans.'

Ditsy's pupils at primary school learned something new too. 'Sander Koenraadt wanted to pay us back in some way, and he gave my class a guest lesson about mosquitoes. He demonstrated that mosquitoes like the smell of sweaty feet using a sock of one of the children's, which they thought hilarious. They also loved it that Sander was on the children's TV programme Klokhuis.'

Ditsy and Clemens are pleased with their fund's results and are going to support the research on vector-borne diseases with a further 50,000 euros over another five years. 'This makes us happy,' says Ditsy. Clemens adds, 'We hope other people will follow our example, especially ex-students.' ■

www.wur.eu/devosfund

NAMED FUNDS

Clemens and Ditsy de Vos chose to set up a named fund under University Fund Wageningen because that way they can be involved in the research they finance. A minimum initial donation of 50,000 euros is required for a named fund. If this is done through a periodic endowment by notarial deed, the donation is tax-deductible. Third parties can also donate to the fund.