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At the invitation of Longfonds, ING relations visit one of the leading Dutch research institutes

Imagine if our bodies could replace bad cells with healthy ones – how incredible would that be. A mere pipe dream? Not for long, if it's up to prof.dr. Hans Clevers. Under his supervision, a team of young researchers work on a breakthrough to put an end to diseases that are still incurable to this day. That may sound ambitious, and it certainly is.

Behind the scenes

Lung Foundation Netherlands (Longfonds) invited a group of clients from ING Private Banking to visit the Hubrecht Institute at its Utrecht Science Park location. The Dutch charity and health organisation is a major financier and driving force behind the lung regeneration research carried out by Clevers and his team. “Visiting the Hubrecht Institute gave ING clients a unique glimpse of what happens behind the scenes”, says Lung Foundation director Michael Rutgers. “It’s not every day you get the chance to talk to an internationally renowned researcher in the field of stem cell research.”

Repairing damaged lung tissue

A few years ago, Clevers and his team discovered similarities between the everyday, healthy renewal of intestinal tissue and the occurrence of colon cancer. They found that with the help of cultured stem cells, it was possible to repair damaged tissue. Clevers: “A single cell apparently knows where it originates from and has the ability to rebuild an intestine with everything in the right place in the right quantities. Using the very same technique, we should be able to regenerate damaged lung tissue.”

According to Clevers, this could eventually lead to some kind of ‘blood bank’, but for lungs. “A patient would no longer be dependent on healthy donors who have died in a road accident. We would have the possibility to remove a piece of lung in the lab and let it grow. We could freeze it and transplant it at any time on demand.”

Connecting social investors with top researchers

Michael Rutgers of Lung Foundation Netherlands outlined the need for an ambitious approach: “1.2 million Dutch people suffer from asthma or COPD. We represent a huge group of patients and are committed to finding a cure. We fund research because that's where the solutions have to come from. Solutions that will benefit (future) lung patients, but society as well. In the Netherlands alone, the societal cost of chronic lung diseases is more than EUR 2 billion a year.”

Lung Foundation Netherlands is now the largest private financier of lung research in Europe, according to Rutgers. “With our programme LONGFONDS | Accelerate, an international collaboration of top scientists, societal and private partners, we aim to accelerate a medical breakthrough for

COPD and asthma. This objective is forward-looking, because we want to make sure that solutions found through research become products or treatments. And since there are only few market parties involved in converting lung research results into such products, we've also launched an investment fund, LungHealth."

Brainpower of entrepreneurs

According to Rutgers, exchanging ideas with ING Private Banking clients is a valuable experience. "We hope to share knowledge, experience and ideas" he said to those present. "We need to explore ways of bringing the results of scientific research to the market. To succeed, the innovative brainpower of entrepreneurs is crucial."

The fact that the Lung Foundation Netherlands is actively seeking cooperation with parties both in the Netherlands and internationally, is an approach which stands out, according to Hans Clevers. "In Europe we need to put more effort into making the transition from academic discoveries to biotech."

Talking to a Potential Nobel Prize winner

Bart Stefels was one of the guests at the event hosted by ING Private Banking and Lung Foundation Netherlands. "It's great to see this kind of outstanding research taking place in the Netherlands", according to Stefels. "It's wonderful that the Netherlands is one of the frontrunners in the field. Just being part of it all for an afternoon with the opportunity to get the research explained by Hans Clevers, who might one day be awarded a Nobel Prize, is special. I'm the type of person who wants to know the ins-and-outs. I'm interested in where the world is going," continues Stefels. "My partner and I both went to Singularity University. At the moment, I'm following a Comenius Course. When investing in equities, I look at the themes that I think have a future. I want to know as much as possible about what's heading towards us."

Connecting customers with potential investments

Stefels thinks it's a great idea for people from different worlds to come together and exchange ideas. "The subject of the event, of course, requires specific knowledge. But I think science needs dreamers and people who try to think beyond borders. I believe in the concept that if you can come up with something and it's useful, then it's going to happen. "

"It's also good to see that charities are actively engaged in and are more actively at the helm of new developments. For my partner and me, this event ticked every box. It's fantastic that ING Private Banking is co-hosting these events. Going to a concert at the invitation of ING is also wonderful, but such events are more focused on socialising with other people. Today, with Lung Foundation Netherlands, we learn more about causes we might want to know about or invest in."

We are happy to make our network available

Charity Banker Ron Meeuwissen of ING Private Banking explains why the bank organises these kinds of events: “We are happy to make our network available. One of the ways we do this, for example, is by introducing our clients to the charities we serve. This way, there’s more time for them to see the bigger picture. And it’s inspiring to see what specialists are doing. That’s how we try to deepen and connect.”