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Prof.dr. J.F.T.M. van Dijck  
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Cc:

- Mr. A.G. van der Steur, Minister of Security and Justice
- Prof.dr. C.J.J.M. Stolker, Rector Magnificus Leiden University
- Prof.dr. [REDACTED], Dean of the Leiden University Medical Centre
- Mr. [REDACTED], Head of the National Team Forensic Investigation

11th September 2015

Dear Prof. van Dijck,

We wish to draw your attention to the extremely unfortunate situation regarding our esteemed Dutch colleague, Prof.dr. George Maat. You may be aware of the case as it has been a matter of some recent high-profile, public debate. In summary, Prof. Maat was permitted to present a lecture on the MH17 crash to medical students in his care. Unbeknownst to him, two journalists gained unapproved access to the lecture, taped it and then publicized it. The Minister for Security and Justice held Professor Maat solely responsible for distress caused to families, criticized him heavily in the media and expelled him from the Dutch national DVI (Disaster Victim Identification) team.

Much debate has followed within our academic community, especially with regards to the negative impact on academic freedom, curtailment of wider professional awareness and restrictions on our ability to train and teach. Our job is already a difficult one, but these recent events have made our work even harder. As a result, we feel that the best interests of education, scientists, teachers and students have been harmed and we wish to alert you to our concerns in the hope that you might feel inclined to lend some support to our stance.

One of the major contentious elements focuses on the use of images for educational purposes and the role of conveying personal experiences in a pedagogic environment. The use of medical images is virtually mandatory in all medical and biomedical teaching activities and it should naturally follow that when we are to instruct those who will be our successors, then they also should expect access to the reality of the situation. Such images are obviously highly graphic but that is the essence of the environment in which we operate. If a young person is considering our professions as their future career, then we are duty bound to ensure that they are prepared for the reality and have access to as much real information as possible to facilitate their decision making. The medical and personal costs

that ensue when young professionals are unprepared for exposure to such challenging events, is enormous and we would be abrogating our responsibility to them, if we did not prepare them adequately for such experiences.

However, the Minister stated that photographs or other footage should only be shared with a very strict and closed group of peers, and he held that this was not adhered to when Prof. Maat lectured to his medical students. By defining the 'group of peers' as being existing forensic experts only, the Minister excludes the possibility that Holland's future forensic experts sit within the audiences of your medical schools. If we are to lose the academic freedom to trust our students and to inform them of the reality of our work, how are we to prepare and inspire them to serve our countries and their citizens when the next disaster occurs? DVI does not sit within any regular medical or forensic curriculum and the future health of the discipline can only occur through free and open academic communication between teacher and pupil.

There is a maxim within DVI that every mass fatality is unique and therefore there is no substitute to learning directly from the most recent event and from the practitioner who experienced it first-hand. We are fully cognisant of ethical and judicial precautions and as in all medical education, images must be anonymised and should serve no other purpose than to transfer knowledge – as in this situation. That there were no protocols in place to address an incident such as this, is not the fault of Prof. Maat. It is a lesson to be learned by all, so that it can be prevented from happening again. Nobody predicted this situation and therefore it is unjust to punish the person who merely exposed the flaw.

The Netherlands has now set a very unfortunate and damaging precedent which will take some work to undo. Forensic experts from across the world have watched with growing concern as one of its most respected practitioners has been denounced by his government for doing what he had permission to do whilst serving his country. As a direct consequence of this stance in the Netherlands, we have international colleagues who admit to altering their approaches to teaching, to removing material that they would normally use, to reducing information and detail, they are avoiding controversial discussions and are fundamentally 'dumbing down' the presentation of DVI to their trainees. This approach damages our teaching, it neither aids nor inspires our students, it stifles our academic responsibility and limits scientific progression in this impactful societal service.

The minister also exposed Prof. Maat to the media without any protection. We were horrified to see the portrayal of a brilliant teacher and compassionate expert as an uncaring thrill seeker. He is a man of deep integrity whose only intention was to pass on his experience to his students. A subsequent police report agreed with the international community about the professionalism of Prof Maat, but the Minister chose to ignore all evidence and throw Prof Maat to the wolves. All an academic accrues throughout their career is a reputation and the Netherlands has seen a government minister reduce 47 years of unblemished academic service and scientific integrity, to tatters. The fugacious nature of loyalty has never been more clearly demonstrated and resonates loudly as a caution for every forensic practitioner around the world. If personal attacks by the media are not robustly countered by a calm and rational response by the government or appropriate scientific bodies, it will impact unfavourably on the willingness of our young trainee experts to participate in future disasters. The politically charged situations in which we often operate should evoke an environment in which the forensic expert is protected and supported, not publicly exposed and condemned.

A group of the world's leading forensic professionals wrote to the Minister of Security and Justice to object to his treatment and portrayal of Prof. Maat. This letter is attached. The Minister refuses to recognise our claims, see his attached letter, but our faith lies with our scientific community and not with politicians. It is our deepest hope that the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences will support the stand we make for academic rights and freedom, education without censorship and support for our scientists from persecution. Politics has no place in academic integrity, honesty and the right to teach and be taught – we hope you will agree.

Sincerely,

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