

Robert Simons

A specific incident sparked Robert Simons' interest in human rights. While on a Dutch Red Cross assignment in Sudan in 1985/86 he was confronted with a political situation whereby some 60,000 refugees and displaced persons would have been denied any form of medical assistance on ethnic grounds, which he was not willing to accept. This led to a deep commitment to health and human rights ever since.

On return to the Netherlands in 1986, Robert became a board member of the Johannes Wier Foundation (JWF), an organization for health professionals for defending and promoting human rights in all areas of health. He began to run workshops for nurses and doctors who work in various settings, such as the armed forces, prisons, police, and refugee camps. He became an activist for equal health rights for undocumented people, supported colleagues facing human rights dilemmas, and he joined and supervised fact finding missions in Romania, Gaza, Pakistan and the former Yugoslavia into health related human rights violations.

In 2001 Robert became the chairperson of the International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organizations (IFHHRO). In that capacity he has played a key role in developing and expanding IFHHRO, including human rights and advocacy training for health professionals throughout the world, establishing regional partners in Uganda, India and Peru with others being planned, and he was instrumental in the successful initiative to establish the post of Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health within the UN human rights system, which was instituted in 2002 and is now strongly supported by IFHHRO. The IFHHRO focuses on implementing the Right to Health, mobilizing health professionals and organizing annual conferences on specific issues, such as HIV/AIDS (Utrecht, Netherlands, 2004), Engendering the Right to Health (Mumbai, India, 2005), the Right to Health and Exclusions (Lima, Peru, 2006) and the Right to Health and Health Systems (Harare, Zimbabwe, 2008).

With all this work, Robert is also the Principal Nurse and Division manager of the Amsterdam Academic Medical Centre, where he has pioneered nursing research, and organised and promoted the prestigious Anna Reynvaan lecture and award, given yearly to a nurse who can combine the best of nursing in hospital and community, research and teaching. In his activities, Robert has always played a stimulating role, starting new initiatives and showing resilience in expanding the international network of health professionals for human rights. He has designed human rights curricula and published various articles and edited texts in Dutch and the international nursing press. His basic credo and message is the inclusion of human rights in the daily work of nurses and doctors, and this drives him to help and teach his colleagues to do the same.