



## **CSRH: Congratulations on 30 years of critical scholarship and working with communities**

### **John de Wit, Director of CSRH 2007–2016**

It's fair to say that CSRH has long held a special place in my mind and heart, albeit reluctantly at first. When I became aware of CSRH, actually the National Centre in HIV Social Research, as it was called back in the day, I had just started work on my PhD. That was also just about the time when the centre had been established, but I was oblivious to that and this feat was certainly not evident from the confidence in which members of the centre engaged in international scholarly debate. There were many debates in the early years of the HIV response, for instance

about the question whether an increase in condomless anal sex constituted an upturn in risk taking or reflected clever risk reduction emanating from communities taking charge of their own health and wellbeing. Another debate was about whether younger gay and bisexual men were at higher risk of HIV than older men. And many more debates followed over time, and included issues such as treatment optimism, treatment as prevention, PrEP and risk compensation. Certainly in the early years of the centre, the engagement in scholarly debated was passionate, if not intimidating at times, certainly for those, like myself, did not always fully agree and had their own take on independence as being non-aligned. What was also clear was that the scholarly perspectives advanced by the centre always drew attention to the perspective of the people concerned and questioned dominant views that often indeed were a bit facile.

From early on in my life as a professional and community-attached researcher in HIV, I was fascinated and inspired by this critical stance, independent thinking and capacity to bridge scholarly work with a genuine focus on working with and for communities. Even if it meant not being the most popular person in the crowd. I guess over time I learned that this description fitted me as well. I was hence very excited when, in 2007, I finally had found an opportunity to come to Sydney and visit the centre, in conjunction with attending the periodic meeting of the World Association of Sexual Health that was being held at what then was the Sydney Conference and Convention centre, in Darling harbour. Little did I know that this was the beginning of a great period of working at the centre that started only months later. I remember very well driving to the South Head with Sue Kippax, on a rainy Sunday afternoon in April, when she told me that she was going to retire. That seemed an inconceivable idea and I was even more flabbergasted when she asked me if I was interested in perhaps applying for the role. What I remember is that I mumbled something like 'sure'. And the rest is history.

Over the eight years that followed I had the privilege of being at the helm of CSRH and these years were quite something. The original attraction to me of course was the possibility to fully focus on social (and behavioural) research on HIV, as well as STI, and learn about research on hepatitis C from Carla and colleagues. There was indeed the fantastic research we did, some of which I continue to be involved in, but there were also many other things that affected the centre and needed to be addressed. The landscape of BBVS research and response has always been politically fraught, and with money becoming shorter, we embarked on a journey to reconsider our strategic directions, and the centre became the CSRH. While I hadn't counted on the managerial, financial and political challenges we were going to face, working as the centre director was a great time. And I miss the collaboration with many wonderful people. Just like a mumbled 'sure' brought Philippe and me to Sydney, so did a mumbled 'I'll think about it' mark the beginning of the return to Utrecht, which was hastened by wanting to be closer to ageing parents. It's five years hence now, and I'm pleased that I am still connected to CSRH, although I sense the cord gradually thinning. Unfortunately.

Congratulations CSRH, on your 30th anniversary, and many happy returns. From John de Wit.