

Boosting Research Careers



FRESH AIR field research in Uganda.

Evelyn Brakema is a GP resident & researcher at the Leiden University Medical Centre

How did you become involved with the IPCRG?

While finishing medical school I heard about a FRESH AIR PhD research position. The global health aspect really interested me and the opportunity to learn more about primary and respiratory care, which was largely new to me, was appealing.

I feel lucky to have had the experience with FRESH AIR. The project offered a very welcoming atmosphere, and it was easy to fit in. The IPCRG was central in creating this positive culture, as well as gaining the grant in the first place and facilitating the network, including the four countries we conducted our research in. This was how I initially became involved with the IPCRG, but it led to more valuable opportunities, including facilitating several IPCRG Research Schools in a great international team and participating in IPCRG conferences, which I was very enthusiastic about.



Evelyn Brakema

How have the opportunities in IPCRG enabled you to grow in the field of research?

With my PhD in FRESH AIR, I feel like the IPCRG network was essential in carrying out the work. I felt lucky to work with the great people involved and collecting data in Greece, Uganda, Kyrgyzstan & Vietnam was a real privilege. I feel that the unique trust and learning I gained has really helped to form my research career.

On top of building research skills, I also gained valuable soft skills and real inspiration from the people I have worked with. A prime example is Talant Sooronbaev, who is a visionary leader and the IPCRG member lead in Kyrgyzstan. Talant showed me how to pursue your vision and to build a team of excellent people in order to do so. He demonstrated how contagious enthusiasm can be.

Have you been able to follow your interests in respiratory research?

The global health aspect still interests me greatly, and that is why my focus has moved to the ecological crisis and its impact on health, including the role of the healthcare sector. I currently follow the GP residency with one research day a week. I was happy to secure various grants so that I can now supervise several researchers who study the field of sustainability in healthcare, for example environmentally friendly inhalation medication.

Besides GP-resident and researcher, I am the co-founder and chair of the large scale Dutch bottom-up sustainability movement: the Dutch Green Health Alliance. With a network of over 120 green health teams, ranging from green medical students to specialists to nurses, we advocate for Planetary Health and sustainable healthcare in our sector and beyond. As such, we are regularly on the national news, and were repeatedly able to influence national policy in favour of sustainability.

What do you think your key research achievements have been?

Career wise, it helps that I can say I have defended my PhD with distinction and published in high impact journals like The Lancet Global Health and The Lancet Planetary Health. But what I am most proud of, is the impact our FRESH AIR research had in practice. For example, bringing cleaner (healthier) cooking interventions into practice by collaborating with communities in a teach the teacher programme created a wave of knowledge and understanding. This resulted in 15,000 people being trained in Vietnam, in Uganda, and in Kyrgyzstan. We discussed our findings and the importance of lung health with the Kyrgyz Minister of Health, who then co-organised a chronic lung health conference together with the IPCRG for Kyrgyzstan and surrounding countries, to push forward training on topics like COPD.

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I have learned so much from the teams I have worked with, and through exchanges in our IPCRG network, for example during a short Implementation research internship with Hilary Pinnock at the University of Edinburgh.

Finally, I made many friendships during the collaboration and gained fantastic experiences, while collecting data at 4000 m altitude and getting stuck in muddy roads in Uganda.

*FRESH AIR field
research in Kyrgyzstan*



*FRESH AIR field
research in Vietnam*

What advice do you have for starting researchers?

My advice is: if you have the chance, make sure to study a topic that you really believe in and that has a purpose, contributing to making the world better. Work then does not feel like work. This is helped by positive collaborations and bringing fun into equation.

What do you plan to do next?

I will continue to combine research, clinical work and the work for the The Dutch Green Health Alliance to accelerate the transition to sustainable (respiratory) Planetary Health.