

# Confidences de Salon



Chair of the European Respiratory Society Junior Members Committee (JMC), Agnes Boots is an assistant professor at the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology of Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Her research interests include oxidant-related mechanisms of lung damage and the use of volatile organic compounds to noninvasively diagnose, monitor and unravel lung diseases.

## Did you always dream of being involved in medical research/healthcare?

Growing up, I always dreamt of becoming an MD as I love to care and help and have a huge interest in human health. However, over the years the realisation grew that I cannot handle situations involving blood very well and that I am too emotionally involved to care for patients on a daily basis. Not sure what else to do, I turned to my parents who suggested I combine my interest in human health and caring for people with my preference for chemistry and biology by studying Biomedical Health Sciences. Following this advice turned out to be a good move, as my studies made me realise that I could fulfil my childhood dream in another fashion, *i.e.* behind the scenes as a translational scientist exploring underlying mechanisms to find new cures instead of in front of the camera as a physician.

## What is the best advice you had when you were starting your professional career?

There is no room for emotions on the work floor! Although I would rephrase this statement a little myself as I think it is important to follow your heart from time to time, I do believe that it is important to make (daily) professional decisions with your head (or sometimes gut feeling!) as emotions blur your judgement. It is better to wait at least a day to send that angry email, or

better yet to not send it all but talk to the person instead, and to combine your strengths with those of people you do not like on a personal level if the research (and thus the patients) benefit from it.

## What advice would you give someone at the beginning of their professional career?

Like what you do or do not do it at all! The scientific world is hard and competitive so make sure you are up for this and do not mind putting in all the extra miles and hours to get to the desired end result. Soon, you will realise this is a great profession that might be disappointing at times but will eventually bring you so much more than research data and papers.

## What has been the greatest change to make a difference in your field in your lifetime?

Clearly, it is impossible to mention just one great change that has made a difference in respiratory science, especially as scientific approaches and techniques have developed so rapidly in recent years. The efforts to develop less invasive approaches to diagnose or monitor a disease come to mind when I think about what is highly relevant for patients at the moment. But systems biology is also a very interesting and newly developing area that will hopefully help us gain useful insights into the clinical phenotypes and underlying mechanisms of lung diseases.

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**Chair of the ERS Junior Members Committee, Agnes Boots, provides an insight into her life** <http://ow.ly/O3MX3004ktS>



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## What do you foresee being the next great thing and what do you foresee as being the biggest challenge in your field in the next 10 years?

I think both the next great thing and the biggest challenge are related to one another, as the systemic approach to diagnose, explore and monitor lung diseases may create a lot of new insights useful for translational medicine, but at the same time generate a huge pile of data that will be difficult to analyse and interpret. It will be a huge challenge to correctly and fully analyse all the data generated from the different “omics” fields and to successfully translate them to the clinic.

## What is your favourite scientific breakthrough from any field?

It is impossible to just pick one favourite, but most recently I would say the use of exhaled air to explore changes occurring throughout the human body is rather fascinating.

## How do you see the future of the ERS?

The ERS is already a very successful and inspiring Society, bringing together clinicians and scientists from all over the world to further shape and optimise patient care, disease understanding and drug development. The driving force behind this success is the structure of the Society that represents and includes people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages and education levels. By focusing on optimising this structure in the near future, I believe the ERS will be the leader not only in respiratory care and research but also in respiratory fellowships. I think it is impressive how the fellowship programme has grown and developed over the years and the Society can be very proud of all the chances it has already offered to early career members across the world with this funding. I believe that it will be very important to maintain a role for the input and requests of early career members of the Society as they are our future leaders. Proper training and adequate mentoring from the Society will help them in becoming the best clinicians and researchers they can possibly be.

## When are or were you happiest?

As cheesy as it may sound, I am happiest at family gatherings with my husband and kids next to me. At the end of the day, all that matters is being

together with your loved ones and enjoying the little things of life together.

## What do you dislike most?

Dishonesty and injustice. Even as a small child, I felt for those who were treated unfairly and tried to rescue them. Although I know that I cannot single-handedly change dishonesty and injustice, and even know it is sometimes wiser for my own wellbeing to stay out, I still get very upset when I see people are treated wrongly for no good reason at all.

## Whom would you most like to thank?

My parents for providing all the possibilities, love and trust to become who I am today and to get there my own way. My husband for supporting me in whatever I do and my kids for giving me all the strength I need by loving me unconditionally.

## What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Enjoying everything that I do and creating time for myself despite the daily juggles, *i.e.* combining a fulltime position, covering both research and educational activities, with my chair position as chair of the JMC on the one hand, while taking care of a household with young kids and a husband who spends most of his time in the hospital operating on the other.

## Who are your heroes in real life?

People who live their dreams and help others to do the same by being supportive, positive, energetic and non-judgemental.

## Where would you most like to live?

On the edge of a midsized city, close enough to enjoy the vibrant atmosphere and activities of the city while having the possibility to escape into nature for outdoor activities nearby.

## What is or was your greatest journey?

After working as a postdoc in Burlington (VT, USA) far away from my loved ones at home, my husband-to-be picked me up to travel through the States for a month. The only thing that we arranged was a rental car and our flights back home, so we lived by the day and enjoyed every minute of it! I never imagined the country would be

so breath-taking or thought this kind of travelling would be so perfect to open your mind and heart!

### **What qualities do you appreciate most in your friends?**

Honesty, loyalty and being open minded to changes in either planning or character. Having a busy and full life, it is also really important to appreciate quality over quantity when it comes to consuming the friendship!

### **What qualities do you appreciate most in your colleagues?**

Honesty and having a passion for what you do as well as the enthusiasm to spread that passion and to engage others, and the optimism to hold on to that passion when the going gets tough.

### **What is your personal motto?**

Life is what happens to you while making other plans. So just enjoy the ride and make it the best you can, as you never know what might come next.

### **What do you consider to be your strengths and weaknesses?**

I am passionate in everything I do, very organised and punctual, and very caring of my family and friends. I love to help out when needed, especially with respect to my (PhD) students finding their own ways in science and life. Due to my passion and punctuality, I can get worked up pretty easily if people are sloppy or not delivering as promised. Using that same passion to get upset and angry in such situations is definitely a weakness!