UNUSUAL AND MEMORABLE

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"Allegory of the world": the ankylosed back as a metaphor for coping in daily life

The gothic panel we are looking at (fig 1) is entitled "Allegory of the World" and was painted in 1515 by an anonymous master. The man portrayed reminds us of patients with ankylosing spondylitis (AS), a chronic rheumatological inflammatory disease which can result in variable degrees of spinal kyphosis.

The core of the panel is a crystal sphere dominated by a cross and representing the Christian world. In the upper part we see a cloudy landscape with rocky mountains above a peaceful sun-bathed sea. The lower part is grim and shows a gallows-tree with some men hanged and many (apparently) innocent spectators. The man on the left of the panel is young. He looks slightly concerned and is bending forward before entering the world with a long straight staff. When he steps out of the worlds on the right, he is older, the colours of his clothing are reversed and the sleeve at his elbows is worn. He

seems relieved, but now not only his back but also his staff is bent, perhaps by his own hands.

The allegory presented on the painting is explained at the top of the panel by an old Flemish proverb. Freely translated it would be:

"Forward through the world I'll go,
if humbly I accept to bow"

For rheumatologists, the painting is reminiscent of the positive coping skills of patients with AS who have to face their handicap. It seems as if their bowed back helps to carry successfully the burden of life.

Although the old proverb has disappeared, its wisdom addressing flexibility remains relevant. Even if tumour necrosis factor α inhibitors can prevent hyperkyphosis in AS, patients will still need to bend at times to face the necessities of life. However, it would

then be at their own choice and initiative!

A Boonen, Sj van der Linden

Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Rheumatology and Caphri Research Institute, University Hospital Maastricht, The Netherlands

P Geusens

Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University Hospital Maastricht, The Netherlands and University Hasselt, Belgium

D Vosse

Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University Hospital Maastricht, The Netherlands

Correspondence to: Dr A Boonen, Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Rheumatology, University Hospital Maastricht, PO Box 5800, 6202 AZ Maastricht, The Netherlands; aboo@sint.azm.nl

REFERENCE

- 1 De uitvinding van het landschap. Van Patinir. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten. Antwerpen tot Rubens, 1520-, 1650.

Figure 1 "Allegory of the World". Painting on wood, anonymous, 1515. Museum Waterburcht Anholt, Prince of Salm-Salm, Isselburg. Reproduced with permission.