

Pieter Van Foreest, The Dutch Hippocrates

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Summary

This year, 1997, marks the 400th anniversary of the death of Pieter Van Foreest (1521-1597) in his native town of Alkmaar. This 16th century physician trained at the universities of Leuven, Padua, Bologna, and Paris. He was town physician in Alkmaar for 12 years and then in Delft for 40 years. The Prince of Orange was one of his patients. On 8 February 1575 he was present, as Professor of Medicine, at the opening of the University of Leiden. His international reputation was based on his Observaciones, a large collection of annotated medical case histories. In his therapeutic approach to patients, Van Foreest showed himself to be a typical 'Hippocratic' physician.

Résumé

L'année, 1997, marque le 400ème anniversaire de la mort de Pieter Van Foreest, né à Alkmaar (1521 -1597). Ce physicien du 16e siècle fit ses études dans les universités de Louvain, Padoue, Bologne et Paris. Il fut médecin à Alkmaar durant 12 ans et ensuite à Delft pendant 40 ans. Le Prince d'Orange était un de ses patients. Le 8 février 1575, il était présent, en tant que professeur de médecine, à l'inauguration de l'Université de Leiden. Sa réputation internationale était basée sur son Observaciones, une grande collection d'annotations de cas médicaux historiques. Dans son approche thérapeutique des patients, Van Foreest se présente comme un médecin typiquement "Hippocratique".

Introduction

There must be well-founded reasons why a 16th century Dutch physician should be given the epithet 'Hippocrates'. The inscription on Pieter van Foreest's gravestone in the Grote Kerk (Great Church) in Alkmaar, *Evictus fato cubat hac sub mole Forestus, Hippocrates Batavis si fuit ille fuit* is referred to by many 17th century sources, for example Cornelis van der Wouden in his *Kronyckvan Alkmaar* (Chronicle of Alkmaar) of 1645, in which he translated the inscription into a Dutch rhyme. This article, which commemorates the 400th anniversary of Van Foreest's death, gives a synopsis of the life and works of this renowned physician (Figure 1).

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Biographical information

Pieter was the eldest son of Jorden Van Foreest (1494-1559) and Margrie Beyersdr. (d.1546). Jorden Van Foreest was a wealthy man of good standing. He was bailiff of Bergen, vassal of Holland, and held several important civil offices in Alkmaar. Margrie Beyersdr. was descended from a respected family of Alkmaar regents.

After attending the Latin School in Alkmaar, Pieter Van Foreest went to Leuven, probably in 1536. At that time Leuven was the only university at which the young men of the Northern Netherlands could gain a university education. The licentiaat that medical students obtained after three years of mainly theoretical study at Leuven University was a licence to practise



Fig. 1 Pieter van Foreest, aged 64 years.
Engraved by Goltzius in 1668.

Medical training

Jorden van Foreest had originally decided that his son Pieter should study law, against his son's wishes, but Nannius managed to convince him to allow his son to study medicine at Leuven. Pieter van Foreest recorded : 'Sic ego anno 1539, cum Lovanii in initio studii mei artis medicæ'. It is not clear whether Van Foreest was already in Leuven, following the preliminary Artes training course, during the period between the end of 1537 and the Spring of 1539. (Figure 2) This foundation course, given by the Artes Faculty lasted for two years and was compulsory for all students wishing to study medicine, law, or divinity and who were not members of a religious order or otherwise exempt.

The Liber Studiosorum of Leuven University records the registration of four pupils from the Latin School in Alkmaar on 28 April 1539: Alardus Gellii, Laurentius Jacobi, Petrus Jordani (Pieter Jordensz. van Foreest), and Jacobus Adriani. At that time, the medical course was almost completely theoretical and consisted mainly of reading and interpreting the works of Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Galen and Celsus.

medicine. Pieter Van Foreest went on a peregrinato academica (an academic tour) of Italy and France in order to gain the necessary practical experience and to obtain his doctorate. Thereafter he successfully practised medicine in Alkmaar for twelve years.

Van Foreest was town physician in Delft from early 1558 to 1595, and counted the Prince of Orange and his family among his many patients. When the Prince was murdered on 10 July 1584, Van Foreest performed the postmortem examination and embalmed the corpse before it was buried in the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) in Delft.

In 1575 Van Foreest was appointed Professor of Medicine in Leiden. He returned to Delft the same year after attending the opening of the University on 8 February 1575 and after having given but one lecture. Following the death of his wife, Eva Augustdr. van Teylingen, in early July 1595, Van Foreest returned to his native town, Alkmaar, where he died two years later, on 10 March 1597.

Van Foreest's stay in Leuven was short. During 1539 he returned to Alkmaar, where he studied, under the supervision of the Alkmaar physician Melis, the works of Arnoldus de Villanova (1300-1363). Villanova attached great importance to contact with and observation of patients. He taught that all true knowledge comes from the senses. It was this contact with patients that was missing in Leuven, and for this reason students, including Van Foreest, travelled to the clinics of the Italian universities of Padua and Bologna.

Stay in Italy and France

When Pieter van Foreest, accompanied by several Dutch studentfriends, arrived in Bologna

Fig. 2 Leuven University. Founded in 1425 and for 150 years the only university in the Netherlands.

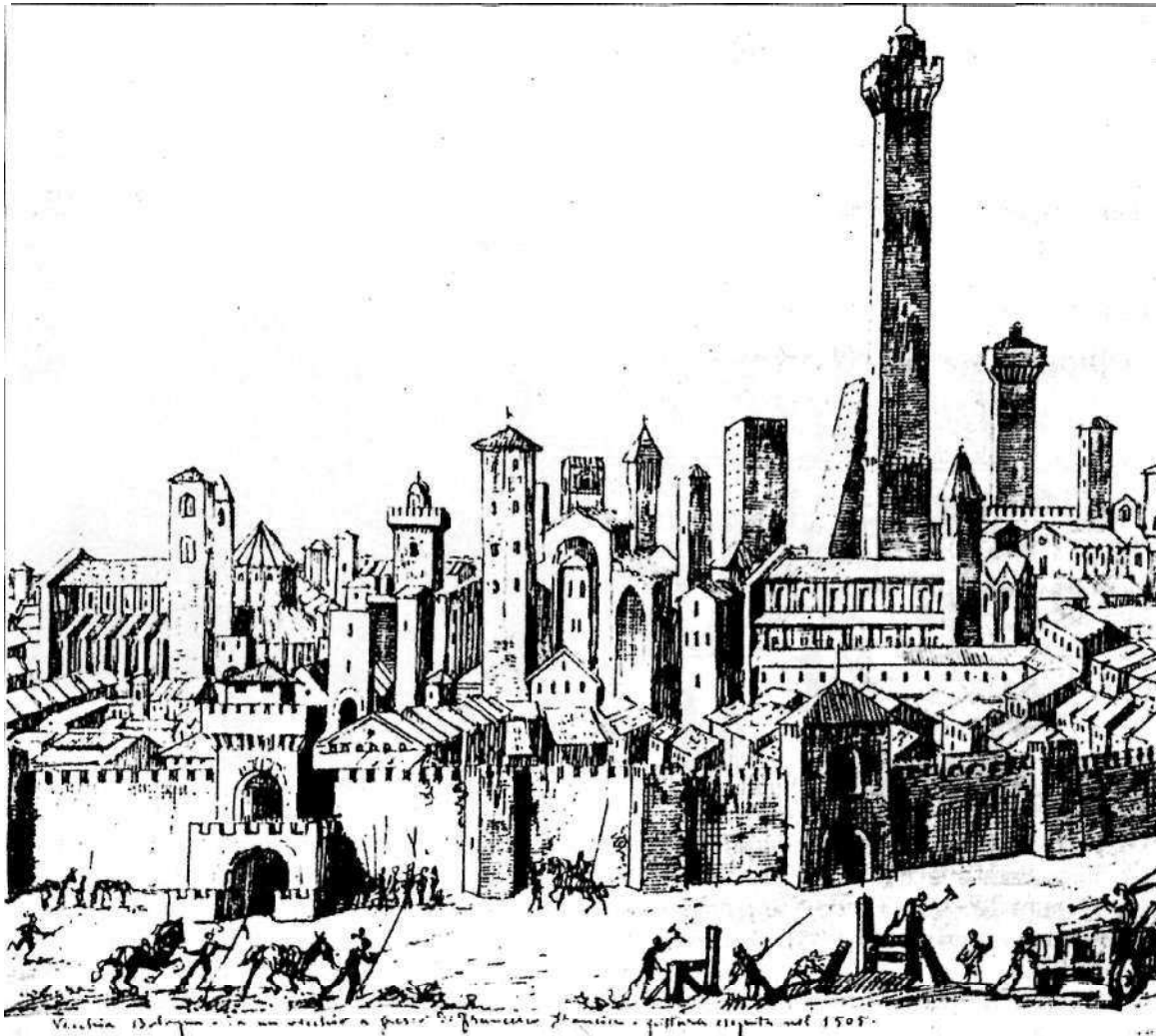


in 1540, there were'... several learned physicians who quickly and effectively healed the ill and the sick' (Figure 3). Van Foreest attended the botany classes given by Luca Ghini, a physician from Florence, who in 1543 and 1544 was the first Professor of Botany. Ghini's lectures covered the works of the Greek physician Dioscorides (circa AD 50), whose five volume *De Materia Medica* was for centuries the standard work and formed the basis of botany in the 16th century. Ghini founded the botanical gardens of Pisa and Florence.

Van Foreest's principal lecturer in practical medicine was Benedictus Faventius. Not only was Faventius a great scholar - his books, for instance those commenting on the works of Hippocrates, were reprinted up to the 17th century - but he also had considerable practical experience. Van Foreest referred to Faventius and his colleague Helidaeus as 'praceptor meus'. Helidaeus was principal of the *Nosocomium vitae*, where, under his supervision, students could gain clinical experience.

Besides botany and clinical medicine, a large part of the study was devoted to lectures on the anatomy of the human body. Anatomical demonstrations had been given in Bologna since the 13th century. Van Foreest attended the lectures and demonstrations given by Berengario da Carpi (1470-1550), who was an extremely accurate observer and investigator. In fact, identifying several inaccuracies in Galen's works on human anatomy, he started to correct Galen's anatomical descriptions on the basis of his own experience before Vesalius did so. In this respect, he can be considered a predecessor of Vesalius. Falloppio (1523-1562), Professor of Anatomy in Ferrara and successor to Vesalius in Padua, justifiably described Da Carpi as '...without doubt the first who revived anatomy, an art which was later perfected by Vesalius'. Da Carpi was also a skilled surgeon - Van Foreest called him 'M. Jacobi de Carpo Bononiensi, chirurgi expertissimi'. Da Carpi, who from 1502 to 1527 was Professor of Surgery and Anatomy in Bologna, wrote two important works: *Commentaria* on the work of Mondino (1521) and a compendium of these, entitled *Isagoge brevis*

Fig. 3 View of 16th century Bologna.



(1522 and 1523). Da Carpi was well-known among the nobility for his treatment of syphilis, which the Italians called the mal francese, and was the first to use mercury in his ointments. Later, when in Delft, Van Foreest advised strongly against this treatment. Da Carpi owned a large collection of paintings, including a painting of John the Baptist by Raphael. On his death, he bequeathed the entire collection to the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso d'Este (1476-1534).

Lastly, mention should be made of Antonia Maria Betti (7-1562), who supervised Van Foreest's visits to the patients in the hospital in Bologna. Betti was Professor of Logic and Practical Medicine. His lectures dealt with the work of Avicenna, and he published, in 1562, a

Commentarius in quatern Fen Primi Canonis Avicennae.

The Liber Actorum Utriusque Collegii (page 134, in the Archivio dello Studio, number 191) records that Van Foreest was awarded his doctorate in medicine on 29 November 1543 in Bologna (1543, 29 Novembris, Petrus Alchimarianus germanus). He was 22. At that time students were not required to write a thesis but had to demonstrate their familiarity with the classic Greek writers. In the morning candidates were given a text 'in libro Tegni Galeni' as one of Hippocrates' aphorisms plus Galen's commentary. During the course of the day the candidate was expected to discuss these with the assembled doctors. In order to reach this

stage, candidates had to have passed an examination taken a few days earlier.

One of Van Foreest's fellow students, Andreas Merica (1520-1585), was awarded his doctorate on the same day. He is entered into the *Liber Actorum* as 'Andreas Lemariensis', which indicates that he was born in Lemmer, Friesland. Van Foreest and Merica probably met in Leuven and then travelled, with other students, to Italy. Van Foreest and Merica lived in the same house, because Van Foreest speaks of 'contubernalis'. After his return to the Netherlands, Merica practised medicine in Leeuwarden for forty-two years until his death on 6 December 1585. Van Foreest and Merica kept in contact, sending each other long, detailed letters. Van Foreest called his fellow student 'Andreas Lemariensis, frisius medicus doctissimus, amicorum candidicissimus'. Unlike Van Foreest, Merica did not leave any publications to posterity, although it is known that he wrote several medical and theological works. These were destroyed, on his orders, after his death.

After being awarded his doctorate, Van Foreest travelled to Rome via Florence, Pisa, Lucca, Livorno, and Sienna. He worked for a short time in the *Nosocomium Sancta Maria della Consolazione*, whose director was the Amsterdammer Gijsbertus Horstius. Shortly thereafter Van Foreest was in Paris, where he attended the lectures given by Jacobus Sylvius and to whom he gave the medicinal plants he had collected in Italy. Van Foreest later wrote 'Jacobus Sylvo, die inden selfden tyt las Galeno, van die simpelen medicamenten ende cruyden. En die eenige simpelen, die ik in Italien met groten arbeyt hadde versamelt en met genomen, begeerde eenige van die te hebben on desefden na 'tleven te bethonen synen toehoorders in lesen, 'twelcken ik hem niet en weygerde.' 'I gave Jacobus Sylvius, who at that time was giving lectures on the medicines and herbs that Galen used, all the plants that I had collected

with great difficulty in Italy .' After practising medicine for a short period in Pithiviers, a small town near Orleans, Van Foreest returned to Alkmaar in 1546.

Town physician in Alkmaar

Although documents which describe Pieter Van Foreest's duties as town physician no longer exist, we can get an idea of his responsibilities from othertown physicians' 'contacts' which have survived. The duties of town physician can be globally divided into three aspects. In the first instance, the town physician was obliged to provide medical services free to those people who could not pay for them. A second task, not to be underestimated, was to give advice to the town council concerning all medical situations and events that could affect the health of the inhabitants. Finally, the town physician had a controlling task, defining the bounds of medical practice and protecting inhabitants from unqualified medical practitioners. Although at that time the sale of herbs, pills, and potions by itinerant quacksalvers was accepted practice, these products had to meet certain standards.

The Alkmaar barber-surgeons' guild 'Cosmas en Damianus' was founded on 12 May 1552, and it is very likely that Van Foreest, as town physician, had an advisory role in drawing up the statutes which detailed the competence and responsibilities of the guild's members. Van Foreest was moreover examiner of the trainee barber-surgeons. These were required to prove their practical competence before they were allowed to practise independently as barber-surgeons.

The plague epidemic in Delft in 1557-1558

For nearly forty years Pieter Van Foreest used his knowledge and skills to the benefit of the health of the inhabitants of Delft. 'I came across seven funeral processions before I had passed the Old Church and reached the house

of Jan Jansz. de Huijter, a famous man and member of my wife's family. The churchyard was so full with corpses that the ground was raised to the level of the churchyard wall'. This description is typical of the situation Van Foreest encountered when he came to Delft in February 1558 during the plague epidemic. The town council had asked him to come, possibly because the town physician, Cornelius van der Heyden, could not cope with the demand for assistance, but more likely because Van der Heyden had stipulated in his contract with the town council that he would not be required to treat plague victims. Although Van Foreest took up his duties in 1558, he was only registered as town physician on 13 December 1560. The delay in this formal recognition of his position was due to "... the absence of the Secretaries because of the plague that then reigned'.

The citizens of Delft fell victim to the plague shortly after the epidemic broke out in Voorburg in June 1557. Van Foreest considered that disease was transmitted by farmers who travelled from town to sell their produce. In contrast, the populace ascribed the plague to various natural phenomena and prophetic signs. A comet appeared in March 1557; and its path through the zodiac and the constellations was seen by astrologers as a sign heralding drought, famine, and pestilence. The tendency among the children of Delft to play 'funerals' was also considered prophetic, and many saw this child's play with foreboding.

It is not clear what Van Foreest's opinion of this was. On the one hand he had sent out an official letter, marked with the emperor's seal, to the populace in which he informed them of his fears for the coming disasters, and on the other he emphasized the role of the food shortage and dirty water in the canals in Delft in his *Observationes*. Delft was notorious for its foul-smelling canals as a result of low water levels during the dry and hot summer months.

Five thousand people died in Delft between May 1557 and November 1558, although Van Foreest placed the number at 6,500. These numbers are all the more impressive when one considers that the plague killed about a fifth of the Delft population, (The population of Delft before the epidemic has been estimated at 25,000). Chaos reigned during the peak of the epidemic, which affected both poor and rich, young and old. The daily life of the town was disrupted and even Maria Magdalena Convent, which was used as plague hospital, was in disarray. As noted by the civil authorities in a statute dated 21 November 1557 there were '.. groete abusen, ongeregeltheyt ende excessen, zoe onder die voors. Siecken als andere persoenen van buyten innecoemende' ('... great abuses, irregularities, and excesses, both for the sick and other people coming in from outside...').

Professor in Leiden

For a moment it seemed that Van Foreest would leave Delft for ever, to take up the position of Professor of Medicine in Leiden. The solemn opening of Leiden University on Tuesday 8 February 1575 was celebrated with, among others, an allegorical procession. Pieter Van Foreest walked among the professors, as described by Orlers in his *Beschrijving der Stad Leyden* (Description of Leiden): '... Daeraen volchde de Hooch-Gheleerde ende Vernaerde Heere Peeter Van Foreest, der Medicynen Doctor' ('... There followed the Professor and renowned Gentleman Pieter Van Foreest the Doctor of Medicine').

Van Foreest did not stay long in Leiden. Although he did not give any lectures because there were no medical students, he did give a public lecture entitled 'De Laude Medicinae'. Unfortunately, the text of this lecture has not been preserved. Van Foreest left Leiden and returned to his patients in Delft.

Fig. 4 Detail of the inaugural procession held on 8 February 1575 on the occasion of the opening of Leiden University. On the left an engraving of Pieter van Foreest. (Artist unknown).



because this water was used to make beer, Delft's main trade product. The brewing and sale of beer was a source of income for all strata of Delft society and was of great economic importance. Various decrees about keeping the waters of the canals clean were passed by the town council on Van Foreest's initiative. A good flow of water, even in the dry months, was considered to be essential, not only to the beer industry but also to public health. Stagnant water was the source of various diseases, the most important of which was the plague.

His third task was to monitor medical practice and to protect the populace against unqualified medical practitioners. In the course of the 16th century the Delft town council issued several decrees to limit the unauthorized practice of medicine '...daar gebleken is dat

Town physician in Delft

As mentioned earlier, Van Foreest's work as town physician in Delft covered three main areas. He was obliged to treat patients free who could not pay for treatment. These patients were often admitted to the Oude Gasthuis, the Old Infirmary in Delft, or were housed in people's homes, as also were soldiers. It is not clear whether Van Foreest, in addition to being town physician, was also automatically the infirmary physician.

His second task was to advise the town council about matters concerning public health. In this respect, it was considered of great importance to keep the waters of the town canals pure

vele personen die consten er medicyne pogten te onderwinden ende inwendighe siekten cureren, sonder gestudeerd te hebben aan de universiteit, en ook chirurgyns en apothekers 'wateren en urinen te bezien' en recepten te schrijven, mag niemand de geneeskunde uitoefenen zonder aann burgermeesteren een beweis te overleggen dat zij' toegelaeten tot zijn promotievandoctorschap" ...because it appears that there are many people who constantly try to discover medicines and cure internal diseases, without having studied at university, and barber-surgeons and apothecaries who' look at waters and urine ' and who write prescriptions, no one may practise medicine before they have presented the burgomasters with proof that have been admitted to the order of physician'.

Patients

Van Foreest treated the Prince of Orange several times. He first attended the prince in 1574 when the latter was confined to bed with fever in Rotterdam. Guided by the accepted principles of the role of the humours in disease pathology, Van Foreest adopted treatment prescribed by the physician in Rotterdam. Instead of warm meals and medicines that increase body temperature, Van Foreest prescribed various potions and astringent spices to stop the stubborn diarrhoea of the prince. Van Foreest treated the prince again in January 1581, this time for persistent inflammation of the throat.

Van Foreest had a large practice in Delft, with patients coming from all strata of society. In his book *Observationes*, in which Van Foreest describes numerous case histories and often gives extensive coverage of his treatments, he mentions, by name and nickname, the various citizens of Delft that he treated. Van Foreest was greatly interested in the treatments the Gasthuis recommended to patients with the 'foul pox'. During the Eighty-year War, the Gasthuis was a treatment centre for venereal diseases. Van Foreest reported that the barber-surgeons appointed by the Gasthuis treated their patients with self-made ointments containing mercury. Van Foreest was less than enthusiastic about these treatments. According to him the churchyards were full of people who had died of mercury poisoning. He considered the cure worse than the disease.

Civil functions

Van Foreest and his wife Eva fulfilled several functions in the Delft community. In 1574 he was superintendent of the St Aechten Convent, which had become the residence of William of Orange in 1572. Eva was the Mother of the Girls' Home, an orphanage for girls, in 1591 and 1592. Eva was also Mother of the so-called Poor Friars

from 1578 to 1595. The Friars' House of the Seminarium Theologicum on the Schoolstraat (School Street) was a boarding school for talented but poor boys and young men. They were taught in Latin and Greek and could then register at Leiden University '... to be taught Divinity further and in due course become preachers of the Reformed Church'. Eva would certainly have visited her aunt Josine Adriaensdr. van Teylingen (1550-1585), who was the first wife of the respected Delft apothecary, Dirk Cluyt (1546-1598). Van Foreest also had a close friendship with Cluyt, who had settled in Delft in April 1574, after the siege and capitulation of Haarlem in 1573. Cluyt made up most of his friend's prescriptions, including those for the ingredients needed to embalm the body of the murdered Prince of Orange.

Financial problems

For his work as town physician Van Foreest received an annual salary of 8 Flemish pounds (about 40 guilders) and 2 pounds for tabards. He was exempt from the taxes on wine and beer. The town council also rented him a small house. It is perhaps not surprising, given this low salary, that in 1575 Van Foreest threatened to go to Alkmaar, where he was promised exemption from all taxes. Moreover, the town council did not keep the promises that it had made him. His work as town physician was made more difficult when his fellow town physician, Cornelis van der Heyden, had a stroke in 1570. Although Van der Heyden struggled on for another six years, he did not function optimally, especially when the plague broke out in 1573. The town council was sympathetic, and on 18 October 1575 Van Foreest's annual salary was increased by 6 Flemish pounds. Instead of being exempt from taxes, he was not taxed for housing soldiers and he was not obliged to purchase bonds issued by the town council.

On 5 December 1583, Van Foreest again requested that his salary be increased. The

Fig. 5 Coat of arms of the Van Foreest family. Shield with indented diagonal. Covers and crowned helmet. Motto *Salus Mea Christus*.



powers that be were not always loyal to their faithful servant, because after the death of Van der Heyden in 1576 they waited until 1583 before they appointed a second town physician, Cornelis Buysen. The financial arrangements made for Buysen were much more favourable than those for Van Foreest. The mayors and councillors of the town declared '... dat de conditien daer oppe by (= Buysen) aenghenomen is, ten respecte van zijn vertrecken, ende dat hy in deser stadt onbekent is, sulck met hem ghemaect zijn'. ('... that the conditions under which Buysen is appointed have been agreed, with respect to his departure and to the fact that he is unknown in this town). Nevertheless, Van Foreest's salary was increased, so that the town physicians earned the same income ^{two} and enjoyed the same privileges.

Van Foreest was 74 years of age when he left Delft in 1595, and the laxness of the town council in appointing a successor to Van der Heyden, probably contributed to the disillusionment with which Van Foreest returned to his native town, Alkmaar. His wife had been buried in the Old Church on 4 June 1595, so there was nothing to keep Van Foreest in Delft. To his bitter disappointment no-one tried to make him change his mind about leaving Delft. The town council just let him go. Van Foreest complained of his treatment in a letter to his friend Johannes Heurnius, Professor of Medicine at Leiden University.

Alkmaar reacted very differently to the return of her famous son. Van Foreest was appointed town physician on a salary of 200 guilders a

year. Not a half year later, on 7 March 1597, Van Foreest, who was ill in bed, made his will. Three days later his industrious life ended; he was 75 years old.

He was buried in the Grote Kerk in Alkmaar on 13 March 1597 and the last line of his epitaph, 'Hippocrates Batavis si fuit ille fuit' records that 'If there was ever a Dutch Hippocrates, it was he'; a testimony from his fellow Alkmaar citizens who valued and honoured Van Foreest as one of the greatest Dutch physicians.

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Biography

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