

The International Society for the Cell and Gene Therapy of Cancer (ISCGT) Annual Meeting took place in Amsterdam from September 25th-27th, 2014. They highlighted the most cutting edge discoveries in translational development of molecular therapeutics and diagnostics for cancer. John Adams Institute Director Tracy Metz gave the opening remarks last Thursday, Sept. 25, 2014:

Many thanks to Dr. Curiel for inviting me to give some opening remarks here this evening at the opening of the ISCGT Annual Conference on behalf of the John Adams Institute.

John Adams spans two themes: linkages between the US and the Netherlands, and radical new therapies in cancer treatment. The sad fact is that John Adams lost his daughter Nabby to breast cancer.

Who was John Adams?

He was the second president of the United States, and before that he was the first ambassador from the young country to the Old World. He came here, accompanied by his sons Charles and Quincy, to get a loan from the Dutch. Although initially skeptical, they provided him with the respectable sum of five million guilders. Adams lived here in 1781 and 1782 on the Keizersgracht canal at nr 529. His son Quincy would later become the sixth president of the United States.

And what is the John Adams Institute? We are the premier independent platform for American culture in the Netherlands. We have hosted important political and cultural figures such as Madeleine Albright, Spike Lee, Paul Auster, John Irving and – tomorrow evening – the political scientist Francis Fukuyama.

John and Abigail Adams' daughter Nabby developed breast cancer in her mid-forties, in 1810, suggesting an early inherited form of the disease. The lump found in her breast grew ominously, in spite of the efforts of local healers. Nabby returned to her parents' home in Massachusetts, where doctors prescribed hemlock pills to "poison the disease" – little did they know they were poisoning the patient in the process.

Nabby then wrote family friend, the physician Benjamin Rush, regarding her condition. Based on her symptoms, Dr. Rush recommended that she have surgery to remove all of the diseased tissue. Anesthesia was yet unknown, and Nabby underwent a radical mastectomy without anesthesia.

Benjamin Rush (1745- 1813) was a Founding Father of the United States, and the only physician to sign the Declaration of Independence. He lived in

Pennsylvania and was a physician, writer, educator, humanitarian, as well as the founder of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He spent several years in Europe studying and practicing medicine, French, Italian, Spanish, and science. He returned to Pennsylvania in 1769 and opened a private practice. He was then appointed professor of chemistry at the College of Philadelphia. He also became the dean of the Medical School at the University of Pennsylvania in 1808.

Nabby felt well again several months after the surgery in 1811; however, tiny malignant cancerous tumors were still left behind. By spring of 1813, tumors were visible again. On August 9, 1813, John Adams' daughter died of breast cancer at age 48. Her story will resonate with many Dutch women, given that 1 in 8 are confronted with this disease.

Until the invention of anesthesia in 1846 and antiseptics in 1867, surgery was generally too painful and often fatal; it was only even attempted when no other options were available. Even up through the 1970's, derivatives of arsenic were still used in cancer treatment. Now you and your colleagues are investigating how to use the body's own auto-immune systems to fight the disease from the inside out.

In the American spirit of forward-looking experimentation and innovation, I wish you the very best in your endeavors and hope your conference here in Amsterdam is successful. And don't forget to enjoy the city in the meantime!

Tracy Metz,
Director John Adams Institute,

At the opening of the ISCGT Annual Meeting,
Amsterdam, 25 Sept. 2014

Pictured: Tracy Metz, US Ambassador Mr. Timothy Broas and Dr. David Curiel, organizer of the ISCGT Annual Meeting