

On the death of Pepijn Remmers

20 January 2021



In the early hours of 16 January 2021, our 14-year-old son Pepijn died of carbon monoxide poisoning, in combination with drugs. From the moment he went missing and the alarm bells went off, we have experienced an incredible amount of support from neighbours, relatives, friends, and also from people whom we did not know. It is incredible to realise that, following an emergency message on the neighbourhood app, nearly 100 people living in our neighbourhood started searching immediately. Within 45 minutes, he was found by a close friend of his brother's. The support we have received has been both heartwarming and heartbreaking. It is incomprehensible that such a lively, energetic young man is gone.

Many of us have questions. The story is not yet complete, but in this short text, we aim to provide some facts and first impressions of what happened. This is how we hope to avoid unfounded stories to be disseminated. Writing these things down and sharing them also helps us as his parents - and possibly others as well - to deal with the loss of our son.

What exactly happened on the night of Friday to Saturday?

Pepijn was found in a tent that he had put up just outside the ring road, right next to the former water purification plant in Amsterdam-Noord. He was lying there, stretched out, his arms beside him, as if he were asleep. He had his headphones on. There was a small BBQ in the tent, with a briquette that he had burnt. A soft drink carton and a bag of sweets were lying underneath his arm.

Blood tests showed that he had used drugs. The drug concerned was 3MMC, a new and highly addictive designer drug. The carbon monoxide level in his blood was 70%, which is about ten times the lethal dose. Everything indicates that he wanted to have a trip, to experience that blissful feeling again, and that he had a lie-down for that experience. The small BBQ was probably intended to prevent him from getting cold and/or hypothermic; also, he was wearing his brother's thick winter coat. He was aware of the risks, because we found a carbon monoxide detector which was supposed to alert him if the concentration of CO became too high.

He probably took a pill, lit the briquette, and lay down. He slipped into a daze, and the carbon monoxide quietly and imperceptibly took effect. Either the detector did not work, or he did not hear it, or he was already gone. It probably went rather quickly and painlessly. Which is a poor consolation.

What happened before?

These are the facts of what happened during the night of Friday to Saturday. But does this mean that we have a proper understanding of what Pepijn really died of? One point is that he was having difficulties with online education. Initially, he welcomed the first lockdown, because it provided him with a lot of freedom. But it did not take long before that enthusiasm cooled down. He missed his friends. He was not able to stay seated behind a computer for his lessons for several hours, without

receiving direct guidance. There were immediate distractions on his telephone: he was playing games and focusing on other screens, so to say. One way for him to keep a grip on reality was doing fitness, which he had been into for a while. He had turned his room into a mini gym, where he and his brother Boris did their workouts.

He also picked up playing the piano, which was another positive thing. He managed to master playing “Bohemian Rhapsody” in a short period of time. But at school, he was not doing that well. Things were starting to slip, and he was only allowed to enter the third form of grammar school under strict conditions. His first grade was a 10 for physics. But after that, things quickly went downhill. He saw that he could not keep it up anymore, he no longer knew how to manage things. By the end of September 2020, it was already clear that he was not going to make it in the third form, and shortly afterwards he indicated that another school might be better for him.. During that time, he started smoking pot. From the middle of October onward, we started searching for a new school, with him. A school providing a good balance between structure and freedom, that could move along with his pace and preferences.

Meanwhile, he had suffered a nasty injury to one of his toes. Running hurt. He could not play hockey anymore, he could not go out jogging in the open air. As a consequence, he spent more and more time at home, lying on his bed, watching videos, spending time on Instagram. His rhythm of sleeping and being awake changed. Sometimes, he would go for a walk around the neighbourhood at night, when he could not catch sleep. As a result, it was hard for him to get out of bed the next morning.

We saw that he was at a loose end, but putting the finger on the sore spot was difficult. It was not so much that he was unhappy, more that he thought life was boring. Not exciting. Beaten paths. No challenges. Just bóóóring. School was bóóóring.

Fortunately, at one point he started seeing his friends again and occasionally he would go into the city. We were encouraging this. We were encouraging the fact that he would sometimes jump on his bicycle and ride around the neighbourhood. Thank heavens, we thought: a little outdoor air and some exercise. In hindsight, these probably would have been exploratory tours to find a place for his last adventure. He had found a new project, something that was exciting. All in his own way. Something that should not be possible, but that still can be done – in the same way in which he preferred to climb a mountain by going straight up the slope, through the brush and clambering over boulders, rather than by following the footpath. On his phone, we found a detailed list of the things that he needed for that fatal night. We suspect that over the course of several days, he brought his belongings at that particular spot.

On Sunday night, a week before his death, he was supposed to be visiting friends in the city. He was supposed to be home by 10 p.m., but did not come in until 5 a.m. – cold to the bone. His story was that he had fallen asleep on a bench at the Museumplein, and had had to walk home because the subway had stopped service. This is approximately 10 kilometres from our house. Under the watchful eye of the police, we turned his bag inside out and discovered his use of drugs. The officer spoke to him very firmly: he was the 'goof of the day'. He told him how many young people who had started off by smoking joints had ended up in a mental institution. And he was already using 3MMC. 'But it is legal!' was his defence; he said that you could buy it over the internet and that he had received it that very weekend. His adolescent brain did not understand that things that are legal are not necessarily OK. He seemed impressed. He said he was glad he did not have to be sneaky about things anymore. In the week that followed, a weight seemed to have been lifted off his shoulders: we communicated freely with each other, and he was open, cheerful. We as his parents were relieved and confident that there had been a breakthrough.

The last Friday night, at dinner, he was bright and curious. He was making the old jokes that we all knew. We talked about music from the past, from our days. And about "Watskebert," by the band Jeugd Van Tegenwoordig. He thought that text was a little crude sometimes. That was the sensitive Pepijn that we knew, the connoisseur that he was. In the meantime, he had forged another plan, which he found very exciting and cool. He put up a smokescreen by giving us partial and complete answers. Yes, he vowed not to use drugs again, because he had not liked the aftereffects. It sounded convincing. But he may have been talking about the amphetamine that he had used the Saturday before, as we now suspect – not about the 3mcc.

So...?

The outcome of that Friday night is known. What exactly did he die of? Of carbon monoxide poisoning? Of drugs? Or was it the lack of structure? The dullness of online schooling? Being obliged to be home? The lack of exercise? The lack of real contact? The online availability of drugs? An impulsive character? His playful and adventurous disposition? His hybris and overestimating his own abilities? Our parental supervision? You name it.

There are so many stories to tell, so many interpretations to make. But what we feel right now is that our adolescents are more vulnerable than we think. Their brains are still in development. They need so much care in these times of Covid-19. They may even be more vulnerable than those who are over 80 years of age. Their 'underlying suffering' is of an order very different from that of the elderly, but certainly just so fragile. Let us hold them tight. Let us really get to know them. Support them. They need us, and they need each other.

Pepijn was found with a face mask in his pocket. He followed the measures intended to protect the elderly from the coronavirus. But as his grandmother Lucy, almost 80, said, "I would have liked to have gone in his place." A lot of grandfathers and grandmothers will feel the same way.

For heaven's sake, let us think carefully about what we are doing to each other and to our children, with measures meant to eradicate a virus that hardly bothers them and that will never go away.

Gaston Remmers
Titia Bloemhof

PS: We would like to add that we are very grateful for the professionalism, care, speed and respect with which the police acted during both times he went missing.

P.P.S.: **To the people of the press:** the death of Pepijn has provoked massive media interest across The Netherlands. We are willing to talk about what happened, AND we also need our peace and privacy desperately. We urge you to respect our wish. Please submit [your request by email](#) and we will consider it.

PSSS: We receive many messages of support from all over the country. The messages left on www.memori.nl/pepijn-remmers are heartwarming. We are very grateful for this, and they help us deal with losing Pepijn. **However, we would rather not receive flowers at home anymore, because there is simply no room anymore!** If you still wish to send flowers, please send them to the cemetery: Nieuwe Noorder, Buikslotermeerdijk 83, 1025 WH Amsterdam, with the following specification: "graf Pepijn Remmers".