

History of Physiotherapy Foundation

## Physiotherapy in perspective, 50 years past - present.

*like what dr. Johann Metzger?*



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### Introduction

One of the most famous names we know in 19th century physiotherapy is that of Johann Mezger. Students at the former physiotherapy academies learned what Johann Mezger has meant for our profession and for medicine in a broad sense. Mezger is a name that has somehow stuck with the 'older guard'.

That is why we would like to explain to the 'younger guard' who this illustrious remedial gymnast from Amsterdam was.

Mezger is seen as the founder of the field of physiotherapy, partly because he started his career as a remedial gymnast/masseur and later obtained his doctorate as a doctor on the subject of "frictions of the injured ankle". 1,2,3 The name recognition of Mezger (even in this time) had to do with the fact that he managed to acquire a lot of fame

as a healer. It was even reported made in the newspapers of a miracle doctor at the time because of his popularity, especially in noble circles.2,4

On the other hand, he also received a lot of criticism from doctors, mainly because of his treatments with the "hammer system" with which Mezger believed he could cure almost anything (even *organic defects* or internal disorders). Especially for the latter he didn't always get serious

taken in the medical world, where people also did not like his "hero status".4,5,6 However, his popularity did not diminish. Partly due to his international reputation, patients from all over Europe continued to flock to him. Who was this 'famous forerunner' in 19th century physiotherapy?



Johann Mezger (1838-1909) as a physiotherapist/masseur.

### Dr. Johann Georg Mezger (Amsterdam 1838 - Paris 1909)

Johann Mezger had his original roots in gymnastics. He followed a gymnastics training at the 'Inrichting voor Gymnastics' on the Westermarkt in Amsterdam, where he gained experience in the treatment of scoliosis, through remedial gymnastics under the direction of the Amsterdam city orthopedist, Dr.

Duseau.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

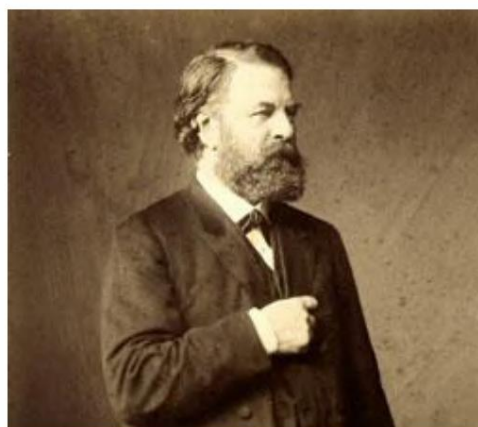
#### *French friction system*

Dr. Duseau saw the young Johann Mezger at work and found the remedial gymnast masseur very talented. The doctor Duseau was the one who encouraged Mezger to study medicine in Leiden, where he eventually also graduated as a doctor at the University of Leiden.<sup>4</sup>

Mezger later obtained his doctorate in Leiden (in 1868) with the thesis *"The treatment of distoripedis with frictions"*. The dissertation dealt with a French friction method used in the Netherlands

had no knowledge of it at the time. In the medical world,

Mezger is an odd one out with this new method. In the healing gymnastics, on the other hand, Mezger got increasingly influential and he is still regarded as one of the most important founders of modern physiotherapy.



Dr. Johann Mezger as physiotherapist arts.

Let's take a look at some feats of arms from this much-discussed career at home and abroad. <sup>4</sup>

#### *The hammer system*

With the hammer system, Dr. Mezger beat the entire abdominal wall and believed it would cure all kinds of internal ailments.

This *"displaced the gases and strengthened the viscera"*, according to the brochure about the treatment method by Johann Mezger.<sup>5,6</sup>

It was also recommended in this

brochure to apply this method preventively.

After all, Mezger hardly knew anyone over the age of 40 who did not have some kind of ailment, so *"everyone should pat their stomach daily"*.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to preventive thinking, on the one hand he was far ahead of his time, on the other hand he was concerned about the proven effects nothing is known about this treatment method and Dr. Joselin de Jong (1901) a strong reaction to the brochure of the hammer system by Johann Mezger because of the lack of evidence for his ideas and methods of treatment.<sup>6</sup>



Patients of Dr. Johann Mezger with Count of Spé with Mezger's hammer (center).

#### **Unparalleled career**

The first remarkable cure, attributed to Mezger (1870), is a successful treatment of an elderly woman from Bonn, whom he got back on her feet

after she had been bedridden for years, which resulted in a friendship with a surgeon (Von Mosengeil) who stood up for him because of this (there were already accusations of charlatanery at the time).<sup>2,4</sup> Then many success stories soon follow. On May 22, 1870, he received his first decoration (Officer in the Order of the Oak Crown) for curing a son of King Willem II. Abroad, his fame did not go unnoticed in noblemen.<sup>4</sup> Many names are mentioned when we dive into the descriptions about Mezger. All wanted to be treated by the

miracle doctor from Amsterdam: Empress Elisabeth (Sissi from the famous film), Lionel Walter Rothschild, Baron and Empress Eugénie (wife of Napoleon III) of France, Queen Elisabeth zu Wied of Romania, etc, .....too many to list call.<sup>4</sup>



*The reception hall In the current Amstel Hotel, where semi-aristocrats from Europe came to receive treatment from Johan Mezger's 'golden hands'.*

To treat all these patients from all over Europe, Mezger chose not the slightest building in his hometown. The miracle doctor received his

patients in the beautiful Amstelhotel in Amsterdam.



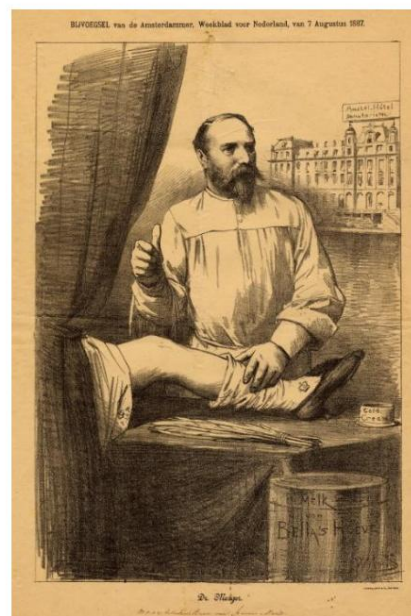
*The Amstelhotel in Amsterdam where a physiotherapist still works to treat hotel visitors with physical complaints with physiotherapy.*

Nevertheless, the remedial gymnast left in 1884 from Amsterdam to The Hague due to a dispute with the city council and Amsterdam mourned his departure.<sup>4</sup>

Fierce attempts to keep him in Amsterdam (so he could become a professor at the University of Amsterdam if he stayed) failed.

Eventually Mezger ended up in Domburg, where his wife came from.

Domburg changed with his arrival into a much-visited seaside resort. many wanted after all, being treated by Mezger and especially from Germany, there appeared to be a lot of interest, and as a result, the small seaside resort of Zeeland was in full swing.<sup>2</sup>



dr. Johan Mezger working in Amsterdam with the Amstel Hotel in the background



*Bust of Johann Mezger in Domburg*

### What can we learn from it?

First of all, that we still make use in physiotherapy of its introduced frictions. This treatment method would probably have remained with a single osteopath or physiotherapist in France without Mezger's help.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to find any clear descriptions of what exactly he did to get that bedridden woman in Germany walking again, for example.<sup>1-4</sup> It could be interesting to know that.

Think of the Macedonian Mrs. Shinka, who also got CRPS-I patents up and running again. Doctors from Hoogeveen (Dr. J. van Gijn and Dr. J. Ek) went there together with a few physiotherapists and a few patients who had finished treatment. The doctors from Hoogeveen studied in Macedonia in 2004 exactly what kind of treatment was given by Mrs. Shinka. The experiences in Macedonia were so surprising that the doctors and

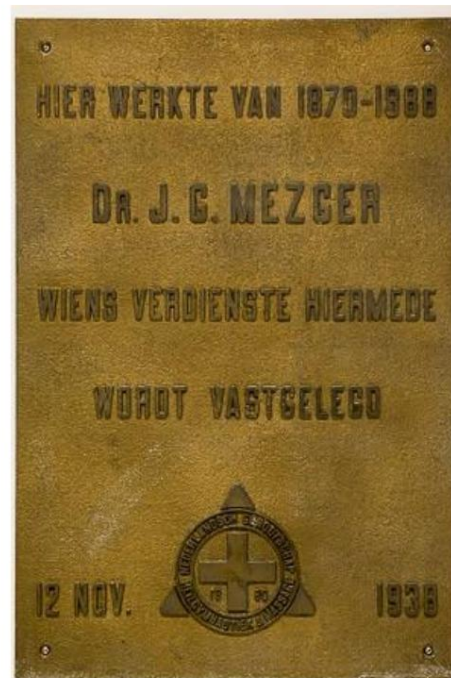
physiotherapists from Hoogeveen thought they should make this public. It led to a new

treatment method that was even included in the guideline (Pain Exposure Therapy or PEPT). We could learn from this that we should remain curious if there are success stories from anyone to see if more patients could benefit from a particular new approach. Ultimately, it is important to place the scientific foundation under the new applied therapy.

Unfortunately, much of the knowledge and skills of Johann Mezger's treatments that have led to the many success stories, stayed with Mezger himself.

Unfortunately, there are also no descriptions that he would have had students to whom he transferred his method.

We have to make do with his thesis (which can be found on the website of the SGF), the plaque in the Amstelhotel, a commemorative shield in his home on the Amstel and a bust in Domburg.



*House Amstel, commemorative shield.*

*Source: Historical Interiors Amsterdam Foundation.*



The current, still original interior of the "House Amstel" 179, on the Sarphatistraat in Amsterdam, where Dr. Mezger lived.

Source: Historical Interiors Amsterdam Foundation.

The other side of the coin is that we  
We can learn from Mezger that as  
physiotherapists we just have to stick to  
our last. Physiotherapists can

a lot but not all...period. Cobbler stick to  
your last!

If Mezger had done the same and thus left  
out "the internal ills" and other conditions in  
his treatment methods, he probably would  
have gained a lot more respect from his  
colleagues in the medical world at the time.

for his extraordinary achievements. "*In der  
Beschränkung sich erst der Meister*" (Goethe).

On the Urkdag in 2019 we will pay attention  
to the similarities and differences with a  
practice intermezzo  
between earlier treatment methods of  
Johann Mezger and current Macedonian  
therapy.

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## Visual material

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