

Getting the right care

A psychiatric detention centre in Ghent will treat mentally ill prisoners

Senne Starckx

With the opening of a new centre in Ghent this month and the stone-laying of a similar facility in Antwerp earlier in the year, the justice system has finally tackled a long-standing and nagging problem: that of detainees being put in ordinary jails when they need psychiatric assistance, after a court has judged them to be of unsound mind.

According to Paul Cosyns, emeritus professor in psychology at the University of Antwerp, who chaired a colloquium on the issue this month, about 900 prisoners in Belgium don't get the care they need. "Of the more than 1,100 detainees in jail in need of treatment, 900 of them don't get any or are treated inadequately," he says, warning that the figure can be expected to grow.

According to Cosyns, this is a structural problem – one for which Belgium has been condemned 14 times by the European Court for Human Rights – and thus needs a structural solution. "The competence for the care of these people should be transferred from justice to public health," he says. "Besides that, detainees should not be excluded any more from public health care."

The two new facilities – forensic psychiatric centres, or FPCs – will together have space for 450 detainees. The centre in Ghent, designed by Abscis Architecten of Ghent and de Jong Gortemaker Algra of Rotterdam, opened this month and has space for 264 male detainees with an average or high security risk. "The FPC is not a terminus, but an intermediate station," said Hans Meurisse, general director of the Belgian prison system.

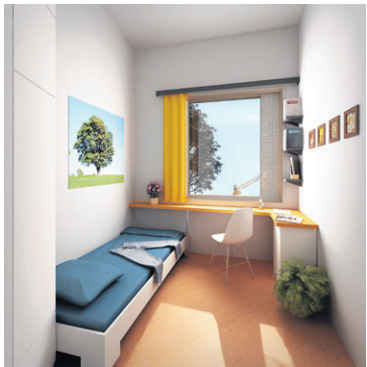
So in what sense does the new FPC in Ghent differ from a normal prison? According to Meurisse, the facility is comparable to a psychiatric hospital, with the difference that it has a high security level. "The building



Ghent's new FPC will house approximately 260 detainees

is surrounded by a 6.5-metre high wall and camera surveillance, but it has also has a transparent fence in the less protected departments," he says. "Perhaps the biggest difference from a common prison is that it has no bars in the rooms, so the detainees don't constantly have the feeling that they're locked up."

The arrangement of the various departments in the FPC in Ghent also resembles the treatment path that every detainee has to pass through. There are separate departments for



orientation and observation, for specific and enforced treatment and for resocialisation – the eventual goal is that a detainee can integrate into society and function normally again, often with assistance in daily life.

While the facilities in Ghent and Antwerp are the first of their kind in this country, our northern neighbours have for years been housing the dangerously mentally ill in specialised facilities. Currently there are 12 in the Netherlands, of which eight are managed by a private company. The Belgian government has also chosen a private partner for the management of Ghent centre, the Dutch group Parnassia.

For a preview of what life in the FPC in Ghent will be like once all 264 inhabitants have been settled, it's good to take a look at the Dutch example.

Typically in FPCs in the Netherlands, detainees are given different types of leave that prepare them for reintegration into society. The first,

the probationary leave, has been criticised heavily in Dutch politics, as several detainees have committed serious crimes while on leave outside the FPC.

Moreover, a considerable percentage of the Dutch detainees are not always happy to be placed in a specialised facility. Their motivation is that sitting out their sentence in a normal jail gives them certainty about when they will be released – even if the sentence is often longer than it might be in the FPC.

The problem with being moved to an FPC is that the detention period can always be extended – giving the detainee lots of uncertainty about when they will be allowed to step back into society.

What the system of leave and extensions in Ghent and Antwerp will look like is unknown. Belgian justice still has to fill in the details in the legal framework that aims to help those who belong neither in prison nor in society.

WEEK IN INNOVATION

Prize for lung expert Lambrecht

Professor Bart Lambrecht, lung specialist at Ghent's University Hospital and researcher at the Flemish life sciences institute VIB, has received this year's Francqui Award. Lambrecht was chosen for the prestigious annual award for a Belgian scientist for his ground-breaking research on allergies and asthma. He was part of the group of researchers that ascertained that excessive hygiene can result in a malfunctioning of the immune system because of a lack of infections. The goal of researchers now is to find ways to "re-train" the immune system so it reacts normally to these common allergens.

€2 million for Limburg Makes It

The government of Flanders is investing €2 million in the project Limburg Makes It. The project allows Hasselt University's research institute imo-imomec to further support the manufacturing industry with innovations, such as use of materials in new products and underlying processes and technologies. Limburg Makes It is part of the SALK recovery programme for Limburg province and runs until 2017. The platform will expand the existing interaction between imo-imomec and SMEs from the manufacturing industry and initiate collaborations with new companies. An active recruitment campaign with workshops, seminars and visits will be set up to involve the business world and encourage innovation.

Biotech drug production simplified

Researchers at the Flemish life sciences research institute VIB have developed a technology that shortens the sugar structures of biotech-developed medications while retaining their therapeutic effect. Currently, the final step in the production of medications developed through biotechnology entails ensuring the right sugar structure, an essential but complex and expensive procedure. VIB's innovation should make it considerably simpler and cheaper. Nearly all biotech drugs are proteins produced by living cells, to which a mixture of sugar structures are attached. These are important for the efficacy of the medication, but their complicated structure also causes problems during production. VIB researchers have changed these cells by adding an enzyme from a fungus, to truncate the structures to a smaller shape.

Andy Furniere

Q&A

David Van Rooij is a lecturer of marine geology and geophysics at Ghent University. He was part of the team that mapped the distribution of deep-sea waste in European waters

The waste on the surface of the world's seas is well known. But there's also a lot on the deep-sea floor?

Sadly, this is true. The environments we surveyed were all in the deep sea, far out of reach of the influence of humans, both in depth and distance. At least, that's what we thought. But the few hundred sampling points in the study already show that there's a dramatic amount of waste on sea and ocean floors.

How does waste end up there?

Below the first 100 metres of the water column, where the circulation is strictly wind-controlled, there are

large layers that all follow a different circulation pattern – often global. Besides that, the continental slope is cross-cut with several canyons, often as large as the Grand Canyon. When the deeper circulation layers cross the shallow continental shelf seas, these canyons act as a gateway that gives access to the deep-sea abyssal plains. In some cases, they may funnel shallow water particles through dense currents towards the deep-sea – a process called "cascading".

A well-known undersea cascade is the Mediterranean Gulf of Lion [off the southern French coast], where dense winter-cooled water sinks in one particular canyon near the French-



Spanish border. These cascades may bring pollutants to depths of 4.5km in just a few days.

How did you discover all the waste?

Our research team in Ghent is interested in the past and present living conditions of deep-water ecosystems,

and in deep-water coral reefs in particular. These are widely dispersed over the European continental margin, but are very much present in canyons. We use our remotely operated underwater vehicle, Genesis, to find these reefs and to take water and coral samples.

We are interested in better understanding the transport of sediment particles through these canyons, since they are partly the food source for deep-water reefs, of which we still know very little. However, during conferences we shared experiences with other marine researchers, and that's how we noticed the common observations of waste in the deep sea. We then decided to make a focal point of this issue and publish the combined results. **Interview by SS**