Chantal Depondt – President, Belgian Neurological Society (BNS)



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Chantal Depondt, president of the Belgian Neurological Society (BNS), introduces the mission of the professional association and offers her insights into the healthcare and research dynamics surrounding neurological diseases. Depondt also delivers a clear message about the importance of continued public and private investments in basic research to foster new knowledge about this highlight complex therapeutic area.

Can you please introduce yourself and the main mission and activities of the Belgian Neurological Society?

The Belgian Neurological Society (BNS) is a scientific organization representing neurologists in Belgium, founded in 1896. Our society has about 350 member neurologists. The BNS is a national society, which means that – unlike many other societies in Belgium, we are reaching out to and have members from Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia. The main roles of the society are to improve clinical care and encourage scientific research in neurology. Indeed, we have at heart to ensure that our fellow neurologists from all around Belgium are up to date and informed about the status of Neurology.

To do so, there are several channels in order to communicate in our network. Firstly, together with other Belgian scientific societies, we publish the journal Acta Neurologica Belgica since 1901, making it one of the oldest neurological publications in Europe. Secondly, we organise scientific meetings a couple of times per year to gather clinicians, researchers and representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and create knowledge sharing. Also, we are constantly working on our website (www.neuro.be), which provides useful information about the work of the society, national and international events and meetings and ongoing research to our members as well as other interested parties.

In addition to being the leading organisation for neurology in Belgium, we are also representing Belgium’s Neurology both at a regional and international level, for instance at the European Academy of Neurology. The BNS can be consulted to advise Belgian health authorities on matters dealing with neurological issues. We are involved in the redaction of guidelines and aim for the harmonisation of healthcare in Europe. Thus, we are actors at the national and international stage of Neurology.

As for myself, I have joined the Society two years ago, and I became the president of the Belgian Neurology Society since beginning 2020. I trained as a clinical neurologist in Leuven, Flanders, and then completed a PhD in neurogenetics in London and Singapore. I am now working in the Neurology department of the Université Libre de Bruxelles’ Erasme hospital.

How would you evaluate the current condition of Belgium in terms of prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of neurological diseases?

One in three people is or will be living at some point with a brain disease. In addition, brain disease is the leading cause of disability worldwide and the second-largest cause of death. Obviously, this situation carries a tremendous cost. In Belgium, it is estimated that about EUR 18 billion are spent every year on brain diseases.

While we can be proud to offer excellent and affordable healthcare to Belgian patients, it is also important to remind that many neurological conditions are strongly related to age. As the population ages, numbers of people affected by degenerative and other neurological diseases are increasing as well. Consequently, this poses an important challenge to the healthcare system and every effort should be made to offer patients a timely and state of the art diagnosis and treatment, to invest in prevention, to encourage research in neurological diseases and to efficiently translate research findings to the clinic.

To what extent has the government/health authorities put prioritization on reducing the burden of neurological diseases?

A number of initiatives are being implemented in Belgium such as the creation and support of specialized centres for specific diseases such as dementia, epilepsy, stroke and neuromuscular diseases, the creation of hospital networks and the centralization of biobanks. However, unlike for some other disease areas, currently no common or umbrella initiatives such as the Cancer Plan exist – Belgium is still without a National Brain plan. Furthermore, the financial challenge associated with the burden of care of neurological diseases should not be neglected. Funding for this area is disproportionate with regards to the burden represented by brain diseases in Belgium.

How competent is Belgium in conducting research in this highly complex therapeutic area?

Belgium has a dominant position when it comes to research on a global scale. Research projects are facilitated by the presence of excellent universities and skilled hospitals, in combination with an attractive regulatory framework for clinical trials. We can be very proud of Belgium’s research capacity because, despite its relatively small size and population, the country is taking ample advantage of assets such as its central geographic position and clinical expertise.

In the life sciences industry, Belgium is quite unique in its position and contribution to both academic and industry research. Both stakeholders work hand in hand in order to promote a favourable research environment which fosters collaboration and innovation. Although knowledge

is progressing fast, the brain still harbours many mysteries. Therefore, it is important that both public and private partners invest in basic research to further our knowledge, but also to translate research findings into potential solutions to treat patients.

How important have academia-industry partnerships become for the field of neurology?

Collaboration is key to success and there are several ways in which we are able to promote this through the BNS. The BNS organizes two conferences per year where we invite national and international speakers, as well as young researchers to present their work. The spring conference is focused on various clinical “hot topics” while the autumn one is dedicated to specific topics such as infectious diseases, movement disorders etc. These conferences are attended by clinicians, academic and industry partners, thus providing an opportunity to meet face to face, find partners, and discuss potential collaborations.

To further foster collaboration with stakeholders of the industry, the BNS is developing a section on their website dedicated to ongoing clinical trials, thus facilitating the recruitment of patients.

How relevant is international research collaboration for tackling CNS diseases? Do you expect Brexit to have any impact on not only the Belgian but the European research environment given the country’s strong research ecosystem?

Aiming to collaborate within Belgium is, of course, part of our role, but it is also important to foster international collaboration. To do so, the BNS is part of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN), which organizes international conferences and engages with researchers. As an organization, we support our members in attending these events to be up to date on the latest innovations and participate in the sharing of best practices.

The exact impact of Brexit on the scientific and research environment is still uncertain. It is possible that ongoing international research collaborations will slow down, though the UK will likely be more affected, for example as a consequence of ineligibility for European grants and funding. However, considering that the United Kingdom and Belgium have strong ties and partnerships, alternative collaborations will probably emerge.

Looking forward to the next five years, what vision do you have for the BNS and the field of neurology in Belgium?

The main objectives that I have as newly appointed president of the society are to further our ongoing projects, continue promoting our events, and enhance collaboration with our counterpart societies nationally as well as globally. Additionally, another objective would be to render the BNS more accessible, increase our visibility, and to reach out more to stakeholders. I truly believe that collaboration is key to progress and success in facing the challenges created by neurological disorders and this is the primary mission for the BNS.

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