

Leuven scientist gets lifetime achievement award

Pioneering research on three viruses that affect 600 million lives



Dengue: an old virus makes a comeback

Matt Williams

Erik De Clercq, Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of Leuven, was recently honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the European Inventor of the Year 2008 ceremony, held in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Throughout his career, De Clercq has studied the majority of known viruses in order to treat them and to develop anti-viral agents. But perhaps his most significant contribution was the discovery of the compound tenofovir disoproxil fumarate, an antiretroviral drug which is now used as part of a "drug cocktail" for treating HIV.

At present, there are an estimated 35 million people living with HIV, 180 million with Hepatitis C and almost 400 million with Hepatitis B. When one considers that these diseases are the three major viruses worldwide, it is not hard to appreciate the significant nature of De

Clercq's work in developing antiviral agents.

De Clercq did not know the award existed, let alone that he had been nominated. He is proud that his scientific discoveries have brought scientific honour to Belgium.

"I was, of course, happy to be chosen for the award. It truly was a total surprise," he says. "It is an honour for a small country like Belgium and for myself."

Professor De Clercq started his career at the University of Leuven, under the supervision of Professor Piet De Somer, who went on to become the first layman Rector of the university and founded the Rega Institute for Medical Research, where De Clercq still works.

"When I decided to pursue research after medical school, I was an exception because most doctors went into practice," De Clercq says. "Normally, I would have begun by practising medicine, but my tutor at the time persuaded me to pursue research instead." De Clercq

then won a scholarship to Stanford University in California. He returned to Belgium after his studies "because my tutor asked me back but also because my parents wanted to see me again."

Receiving such a prestigious award has encouraged De Clercq to pursue new challenges and to continue his work on viruses around the world.

"Recently there has been a steady increase in cases of the Dengue virus," he explains. "I personally believe that this is the most important emerging new virus. At the moment, we don't have any vaccines or any drugs for Dengue. For me, this is a tempting challenge to take on."

De Clercq is very proud of Leuven, the city where his work first began. "Leuven is the home of illustrious figures such as Vesalius, Erasmus, Dodoens and Mercator. Since my days as a student in Leuven, I have never left, having pursued my whole career at the Rega Institute for Medical Research."

After discussing science, our conversation turned to Belgian beer. Here too, the professor was happy to share a little of his experience.

"As it happens, I have taught in two of the major beer cities in the world: Leuven, famous for Stella, and Ceské Budejovicé, also known as Budweis, which is famous for Budweiser," he notes. "As well as the so-called 'monk' beers such as Westmalle, Leffe and Affligem, there is also the famous beer from Melle called Delirium Tremens. But the most famous beer still produced in limited by real monks comes from Westvleteren, a small village located in the vicinity of Poperinge in West Flanders."

Online

www.kuleuven.ac.be/rega
www.sintsixtus.be

BUSINESS BRIEFS

Ford Genk

Ford Genk, the assembling affiliate of the US-based car maker, is again increasing capacity at its Limburg unit to cope with high demand for its Ford Mondeo model.

Alfacam

Alfacam, the Lint-based High Definition TV services and equipment company, is considering the launch of an HDTV station later this year in Flanders. The move could be linked to RTL's plan to launch its own TV station in Flanders this year.

Eric Salmon & Partners

The headhunting company Eric Salmon & Partners has established a new office in Brussels. It is affiliated to the network created by Eric Salmon, with offices in London, Frankfurt and New York.

CMB

Antwerp-based shipping group CMB has sold three of its ships to the US Genco Shipping and Trading company.

Antwerp Airport

Antwerp Airport, home base of regional airline VLM, is to get a new lease of life with a €28 million agreement from Flemish public authorities and private interests to finance its development. The airport, located in Deurne, is VLM's hub and one of the world's busiest airports for the diamond trade. Included in the investment is a runway extension, a tunnel to divert a nearby road and the construction of some 120,000 square metres of industrial and office space.

First Data

First Data, the leading US electronic financial transfers company, has acquired a stake in Brussels-based Eufiserv, the European interbank transfers operator.

Colruyt

Colruyt, the Halle-based discount retailer, has decided to curtail its development plans in the Netherlands until it can find a suitable acquisition opportunity. Meanwhile, the group's projects in Luxembourg are confirmed with a store opening in June and another one later this year.

Belcolade

Belcolade, the Erembodegem-based chocolate producer, the country's second largest after Swiss-owned Barry Callebaut, is to invest €15 million over the next five years to develop its capacity. It exports the bulk of its production to Japan, Ireland and Chile.

Fortis

Fortis, the Belgo-Dutch financial institution, is negotiating with Delta Lloyd the acquisition of a 51% share of ABN Amro Verzekeringen, the insurance branch of ABN Amro. The move will allow Fortis, which recently acquired ABN Amro, to develop its bank insurance activities in the Netherlands.

Efico

Efico, the coffee handling and trading company, is to transfer its activities from Antwerp to Zeebrugge and will build a €38 million storage and distribution centre in the port area.



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