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Signs of the times

While sign languages work to get recognition from the EU, Flanders' cochlear implants become standard for children

DENZIL WALTON

Last autumn, the Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union was signed by all 36 representatives on behalf of 160 delegates of deaf communities at a special conference to initiate legislation for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. The document declares that the sign languages of every member state are native languages and that minimum standards for adequate services for the deaf throughout Europe should be implemented. Next month in Brussels, meanwhile, the Flemish deaf community will celebrate the recognition of Flemish Sign Language by the Flemish government five years ago with a major three-day event in parliament.

This got us thinking that sign language might just be as hot a topic as spoken language. What we discovered took us all the way back to the beginning – what first happens when a deaf baby is born in Flanders. In 1998 Flemish agency Kind & Gezin (Child & Family) introduced a neonatal hearing screening programme – the first region in Europe to implement such a scheme. Previously, hearing problems in many children went undetected until they went to school for the first time. Every newborn in Flanders now gets a visit from a care worker from Kind & Gezin, who conducts an automated hearing test. Virtually all countries in western Europe and most states in the US have now followed Flanders' lead.

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Belgium sends F-16s to Libya

Belgium is sending a minesweeper, six F-16 fighters and about 230 military personnel as part of the international action being taken against the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Belgium already has eight F-16s on exercise in Greece, and, according to the Air Force, six of those would go into action as *Flanders Today* went to press. The personnel detail will include about a dozen pilots as well as support staff, whose numbers will depend on the base at which the jets are stationed and whether other nations are also present to share technical responsibilities. The detail will be supplied from air bases in Kleine Brogel, Limburg province, and Florennes, Namur province. The planes themselves come from Limburg.

Each F-16 will be equipped with two medium range AIM-120 Amraam air-to-air missiles and two short-range AIM-9 Sidewinders. Since the aircraft on exercise have only missiles equipped with guidance systems, warheads and other parts will be delivered by C-130. The minesweeper Narcis is also in the Mediterranean, with its crew of 32. The duration of the mission is not known, but federal defence minister Pieter De Crem warned at the weekend that it "could last a long time" and cause "very many casualties". Meanwhile, about 1,500 people in Brussels took part last weekend in a march in support of the "Arabic spring" – the series of popular uprisings in the Arab world, including Libya.

Reactors to undergo stress tests Nuclear power plant closure hangs in the balance

ALAN HOPE

Nuclear reactors in Belgium that fail a European stress test will be closed down, federal energy minister Paul Magnette has promised. Meanwhile last week, "a small incident" was reported at the nuclear power plant at Doel in Antwerp province. The European Union has called for the tests following the earthquake-related crisis at the Fukushima plant in Japan and a decision by German chancellor Angela Merkel to shut down seven older reactors in Germany for an indeterminate time. Two are unlikely ever to open again. As *Flanders Today* went to press, Magnette was due to discuss the issue with his fellow EU energy ministers. Only then would it

become known how the tests, which are not obligatory, will be carried out and by whom. "Belgium will also argue for as many member states as possible to submit their nuclear plants to the tests," he said. Magnette pledged the results of the tests would be made public, and any reactor that failed would have to close. Belgium has seven nuclear reactors, four at Doel and three at Tihange in Liège province. "But I should be surprised if all seven reactors failed," said Magnette. "When they were built, the rules were very strict."

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Signs of the times

There are as many sign languages as there are spoken languages

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If the screening shows hearing problems, the parents are referred to a specialised audiological assessment centre or university clinic, where additional testing is completed within four weeks. These centres work closely with the five early intervention teams in Flanders (one per province), which inform parents about hearing problems and the communication and therapy options.

Early screening is vital because it gives health workers the chance to implement early onset of intervention. In this area too, Flanders is a pioneer, particularly in the area of cochlear implants.

Helping to hear

A cochlear implant is a small, complex electronic device that helps provide sound to a person who is deaf or severely hard of hearing. An external portion sits behind the ear, and a second portion is surgically placed under the skin. A cochlear implant has:

- ♦ a microphone, which picks up sound from the environment
- ♦ a speech processor, which selects

and arranges sounds picked up by the microphone

- ♦ a transmitter and receiver/stimulator, which receive signals from the speech processor and converts them into electric impulses

- ♦ an electrode array, which is a group of electrodes that collects the impulses from the stimulator and sends them to different regions of the auditory nerve

An implant does not restore normal hearing. Instead, it gives a deaf person a useful representation of sounds in the environment and helps him or her to understand speech.

“About 200,000 people worldwide are wearing cochlear implants,” says Leo De Raeve, Director of the Independent Information Centre on Cochlear Implants (ONICI) in Zonhoven, just north of Hasselt. “In the last three years in Flanders, 95% of all children born deaf received a cochlear implant – nearly three-quarters of them before they were 18 months old.”

The average age of implantation is 14 months, but implants have been

successfully installed in babies as young as six months. Of course, such early intervention would not have been possible without the universal hearing screening programme.

The results are impressive. Around 60% of all deaf babies given a cochlear implant can be sent to a normal, hearing school by the time they are six years old. The reason is that the implant stimulates the auditory nerves as early as possible – when the brain is the most receptive.

“It’s a successful combination of early screening within weeks of birth, cochlear implantation in the next six months if possible, and the provision of excellent support of the parents,” adds De Raeve. “This involves helping parents to use the implant properly and advising them how to communicate most effectively with their child.”

When the child enters mainstream education six years later, his or her language ability is either average or only slightly below average. Without implantation, many of these children would not be able to communicate with hearing children or teachers.

Since February 2010, medical insurance companies in Flanders also reimburse the second implant (that is, in the child’s other ear) – previously, only the first implant was covered. Most countries, in fact, reimburse just one implant, but after Flanders began covering the second, Sweden, the UK, Austria, Switzerland and some areas of Germany are now introducing legislation that allows the second implant to be reimbursed.

It’s highly advantageous for parents, as the total cost of a cochlear implantation is about €22,500. After reimbursement, the cost to parents winds up at only about €500, part of which covers the child’s stay in hospital.

Going to school

Despite being in mainstream education, children with cochlear implants still need support, as they can face issues, especially when they are the only deaf or hard-of-hearing child in their class.

“We give them comprehensive counselling to help them look after their device and to learn how to react when a classmate laughs at them or tries to remove their microphone,” says De Raeve. “It’s also important that hard-of-hearing children meet similar children and even adults who wear these devices so they realise they are not the only child with a hearing problem.”

The field of deaf education has been riddled with controversy for hundreds of years, so it’s no



The Federation of Flemish Deaf Organisations (Fevlado) is spearheading a three-day event next month in celebration of the recognition of Flemish Sign Language by the Flemish Parliament five years ago (www.fevlado.be)

surprise to find that cochlear implantation has its critics. On one side of the fence are those – particularly the hearing parents of a deaf child – who support cochlear implants because they believe that they allow children to function successfully in society. On the other side is a sizeable portion of the deaf community who believe that deafness is a cultural identity, not a disability. “With deaf children of deaf parents, we say that their first language is sign language, and we emphasise the need for the child to learn that important language – even after receiving an implant,” explains De Raeve. “But in situations where the parents are hearing and don’t know sign language, the cochlear implant is a huge advantage both to the child and the parents.”

Sign language(s)

However, when it comes to sign language, nothing is clear and simple. If you are under the impression that there is one global sign language that allows deaf people everywhere to communicate with each other, nothing could be farther from the truth.

There are as many sign languages in the world as there are spoken languages. Unlike spoken English, sign languages used in English-speaking countries aren’t similar to each other. Someone using British Sign Language, for example, would not be able to communicate with someone using American Sign Language (which is much closer

to French Sign Language).

An attempt was made to create an International Sign Language, but this has never been well received. Therefore, there is no universal sign language.

Even in a region as small as Flanders, there are two main sign languages (Flemish Sign Language and French-Belgian Sign Language) as well as a multitude of dialectical variants. So the chance that a deaf person in Hasselt can understand what a deaf person in Knokke-Heist is signing is, unfortunately, very small.

This dichotomy is also linked with the absence in Flanders of a special academically oriented college or university for the deaf, at which sign language could be further developed. In fact, there is no such institution in the whole of Europe. The only university specifically designed for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the world is Gallaudet University in Washington, DC.

The advantage of such a specialised institution is that all deaf students from the US (and elsewhere) can come together to study at a high academic level. It’s therefore a wonderful learning opportunity and a place to build on your sign language. This is one of the reasons why American Sign Language is at such an advanced level in all academic subjects, from civil engineering to art history, and computer science to modern languages.

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Breaking new ground in Flanders



Born deaf to a Flemish hearing family in the late 1960s, Helga Stevens spent the first half of her childhood in KIDS Hasselt before moving to a mainstream school – Heilig-Grafinstituut in Sint-Truiden. She then spent a year in the US as an exchange student and visited Gallaudet University, the world’s only university designed for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

There Stevens met a deaf attorney who inspired her to pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer. Returning to Belgium, she enrolled in law school at the Catholic University of Leuven. In 1994, Stevens passed the

bar examination in Brussels and became a certified lawyer.

Two years later, Stevens (pictured) became a project coordinator for the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) and later its president. In July 2007, the Flemish Parliament appointed Helga Stevens to the Senate as a Community Senator. She is the only deaf person who has entered the parliament chambers and also served as Senator. Consequently, Stevens has raised significantly the profile of the deaf community in Flanders, and all discussions in parliament are now signed.

→ www.helgastevens.be

Spreading its wings

Flanders' SonicAngel takes its music investment plan on the road

MARC MAES

Propelled by the success of its first signing – last year's Belgian Eurovision entry Tom Dice – online music platform SonicAngel is going abroad, setting up joint ventures and companies in western Europe and the US. SonicAngel was launched one year ago by two Flemings, who combined the best of both their worlds: musician and producer Maurice Engelen (otherwise known as Praga Khan) and internet entrepreneur Bart Becks.

Becks' background is like a how-to of business: He started his career with FNAC in Paris, became CEO of Belgacom, switched to SBS Media Group, where he was named Senior VP of New Media, and was at the cradle of Netlog, Flanders' answer to Facebook.

He was introduced to Engelen about 10 years ago. "We worked together to produce the first-ever streaming concert in Belgium – Praga Khan's performance in the Ancienne Belgique, which was streamed via Skynet," Becks explains. "We were specialised in our own domains but wanted to cross over: Maurice was interested in innovating within the music business, and music was never far away from what I did."

It finally came together when Engelen was on the jury of *X-Factor*, a Flemish TV talent search. "Tom Dice, one of the finalists, was not given a recording contract," Engelen says. "That's when we decided to go ahead with SonicAngel, combining my long-time experience in the 'traditional' music industry, with a thorough knowledge of promotion, distribution, publishing and media deals, and Bart's expert knowledge of new media like Facebook and Twitter – the direct communication between artists and fans."

How it works

SonicAngel replaces the current music industry business model with a new combination of music and technology in which fans invest in musicians they believe in. Known as "fanfunding", SonicAngel makes music listeners stockholders in their favourite bands and artists, plus supports specific project financing and corporate financing.

"The name SonicAngel stands for music, innovation, and angel investors," says Becks. "Plus, Maurice's surname is Engelen." (*Engelen* is the Dutch word for "angels".) Becks and Engelen screened hundreds of internet music companies to see what worked and what didn't. The conclusion was that fan empowerment continues to grow and could serve as a basis for a new business model, with fans helping to discover, finance and even release the music of their favourite artists.

In a parallel move, the two persuaded sponsors such as AB-Inbev, Sony Ericsson and ING bank to give financial support to the project. "We produced tailor-made programmes for the sponsors where we go along with their business philosophy," explains Becks. "The goal is to give new talent an opportunity, and many companies bear the same concern."

Partner companies have access to SonicAngel artists and their music for marketing, promotion and concerts, such as the AB-Inbev club tour, summer concerts for ING or free SonicAngel downloads on Sony Ericsson phones.

Corporate interest has been so successful, that SonicAngel recently launched the FAB division (Fans, Artists & Brands) "that finds new partners to see how we can work together, with all respect for the artists," says Becks.



SonicAngels Bart Becks (left) and Maurice Engelen (aka Praga Khan)

They asked, they received

Business has moved very fast for SonicAngel – after they signed Tom Dice (whose supporters received back 260% of their €10 investments in his album *Teardrop*), the idea was to launch about 12 artists in the first year. Less than a year later, their artist roster lists 16 artists and bands, 12 of them fully financed for amounts between €12,500 and €45,000. "The concept is really catching on with the fans as we gave ourselves until mid-June to finance the whole roster," enthuses Becks. Backed by the success in the home market, SonicAngel is now launching internationally, via strategic partnerships in Germany, France and the Netherlands. "A thorough knowledge of the market is crucial, so we prefer to work with local partners, who have an eye for emerging talent," explains Engelen. "We supply the platform for their artists, traditional talent scouting and monitoring what's moving

on the internet, for which we developed our own tools."

On 1 March, SonicAngel launched as a fully fledged company in the US. Corporate and strategic partners in Belgium, supporting the idea of exporting the concept, paved the way with American parent companies and affiliates, like Anheuser-Busch and Hewlett Packard.

"The fan base idea has much more potential in the US, with so many artists," says Becks. "So we plan to start up a number of sub-labels there to categorise different music styles." The first will be Electroland, for techno and dance artists.

The launch of SonicAngel in the States includes a one-month tour that kicked off 2 March at the Los Angeles Nokia theatre, featuring Engelen's Praga Khan spin-off band Lords of Acid and Radical G. ♦

→ www.sonicangel.com



"The cochlear implant is a huge advantage": Leo De Raeve

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"This contrasts with the situation in Flanders, where most of our deaf students are studying a vocation – learning to be a baker, butcher, carpenter etc," says De Raeve. "However, there are notable exceptions." (see sidebar, page 5)

Flanders does have special schools for the deaf – one per province. KIDS, the Koninklijk Instituut voor Doven en Spraakgestoorden (Royal School for the Deaf and Speech Impaired) in Hasselt, for instance, provides education, rehabilitation and counselling services for around 1,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing children aged three to 18. This assistance is offered in residential, semi-residential and outpatient form, delivered by a staff of more than 400. (On our cover is Xander, who goes to KIDS.)

Born deaf

Despite vaccinations against rubella and meningitis, deafness is not on

the decline. "At KIDS Hasselt we are supporting about 20% more deaf and hard-of-hearing children than 15 years ago," says De Raeve, who works part time at the school as a psychologist. "This is partly because of universal hearing assessment leading to more hearing problems being detected, but there is another possible reason for the increasing prevalence of deafness. Hearing loss in a child may be linked to a virus that the mother got while she was pregnant."

That is the cytomegalovirus (CMV). It's a common virus that normally causes a harmless infection. However, if a woman gets CMV while she's pregnant, there is a 33% chance that it passes on to the baby.

Research is still inconclusive but is beginning to link hearing loss with CMV. Studies indicate that about 9% of all children who have some degree of hearing loss had CMV at birth. The degree of hearing loss varies from

partial impairment in one ear to total deafness. As yet, researchers don't know why being exposed to CMV *in utero* might cause hearing problems in babies but think that the virus damages the cochlea.

"Infection with CMV is very common, but it rarely causes symptoms – often only a runny nose or a slight fever – so most infected people are not aware of their infection," adds De Raeve. "It therefore largely goes undetected. But knowing how exactly CMV causes hearing loss is important if a treatment is going to be developed."

In research into CMV, looking for the cause of deafness in general and possible solutions involving gene therapy and hearing cell regeneration, Flanders is in the front line of European research, with the Catholic University of Leuven and Antwerp University taking a leading role. ♦

→ www.onici.be