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Interview with Dr René Van Tiggelen on his Role as Curator of the Belgian Radiology Museum

Interviewee

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_ Why did You Decide to Launch a Museum of Radiology, and What were the Challenges in Doing So?

I am also a great admirer of Professor Röntgen's, who did not take out any patent for his discovery and in 1901, after being awarded the first Nobel Prize of Physics, reassigned its whole amount to his Alma Mater at Würzburg, Germany.

The originality of the museum lies in the fact that it was born inside a department of radiology. I wished my patients to be intelligently occupied while in my waiting room. I also wished to somewhat alleviate their anxieties by telling them the history of their forthcoming exams. Also, as a military radiologist, I had collected some downgraded radiological equipment in order to train military radiographers. This is how the idea of the Belgian Museum of Radiology took shape.

In 1995, I took the opportunity of the celebration of the centenary of Röntgen's discovery to expand the collection. My superior at the time, the General L. Viaene (Medical Corps) supported the project. Since its creation in 1990, the collection was enhanced by the acquisition of civilian radiological material. Progressively, some colleagues donated obsolete installations. Others gave the equipment belonging to a parent or a predecessor which was cluttering up their suites.

When I started, I benefited from the Army's premises and from its logistical support, but financial resources were nonexistent. This is why in 1996 I decided to create the Friends of the Belgian Radiological Museum Association. The subscriptions of its faithful members ensures the organisation of two meetings per annum devoted to a specific topic, one in spring and one in autumn. Otherwise the museum relies heavily on the volunteers' shoulders.

_ Are there Many Special Radiology Museums Across the World?

There are in fact only a few museums of this kind in the world. In Germany is the Remscheid-Lennep Museum (www.roentgen-museum.de), one at Würzburg (www.fh-wuerzburg.de/roentgen), and one in Palermo, Italy (www.unipa.it/~radpa/museo/museo.html).

_ Do You have Many Visitors to the Museum?

Demand for the museum is fairly large. There is a significant amount of visitors. No entrance fee is asked for the individual. Guided tours are charged a small fee. These guided tours are mainly organised for groups of nurses, radiographers in training or radiology registrars, as well as for historians, senior citizens and even small children who often ask surprisingly pertinent questions. Some radiologists include a visit to explore a peer's assessment of their staff.

_ What Kind of Special Activities or Initiatives does the Museum Organise?

Some exhibitions have been very successful, i.e., "Radiology and Women" and "Radiology and the Nobel Laureates. In 1995 we mounted an exhibition, organised a couple of meetings, edited a stamp and published a book recounting the history of a hundred years of radiology. Among our publications, one of my favourites concerns the "rediscovery" of x-rays and comes with a DVD. Röntgen demanded all his notes about his researches be burned after his death, but we tried to reconstruct the discovery of the x-ray the way it probably happened. The museum's website (www.radiology-museum.be) receives a large amount of visits and allows us to establish many fulfilling relationships with foreign visitors.

_ What are Some of the More "Curious" or Interesting Pieces on Display?

In our museum we display the first (seventh in the world) scanner installed in 1974 in Charleroi, Belgium in Prof. M. Collard's department (see picture). A computer is used to store the subsequent tomographic images, improve or colour the images electronically and reproduce the images in sequence afterwards. It results in in-depth images of the various body tissues allowing the diagnosis of lesions and the follow-up of applied medication and treatments.

Linking computers and tomography was achieved during the research work carried out in the 1970's in England by Prof G. Hounsfield and Prof. A. Cormack. Their work was sponsored by the firm EMI, producer of the very successful group The Beatles. The computer was developed during World War II for deciphering the coded messages of the German and Japanese armies.

_ Where do You Source Your Artefacts from? Have there Been any Notable Donations?

Almost all the artefacts have been offered to the museum. Only a couple of items have been purchased. The Royal Belgian Society of Radiology and the Professional Association of Radiologists gave us the financial means necessary to acquire a radiological installation dating from 1904 (mobile equipment probably used by the "Force Publique" in the former Belgian Congo.)

The "new" portable radiological equipment, is described as follows in the "Archives d'Electricité Médicale": "*The equipment is made up of three boxes: The first one, a weight of 29,5 kg, contains a 23 cm spark coil with atomic contact breaker, a spintermeter, an ammeter and a-periodic voltmeter, a current inverter, a switch, and fuses. The second box, a weight of 20kg, contains: a 24 x 30 cm fluorescent screen in foldable darkroom, a tube stand, a 30 x 40 radiography frame, a series of double envelopes, a gas blowtorch with rubber pipe, a spirit lamp, a chromoradiometer of Benoist, a Chabaud type tube with osmotic regulation and a classical tube, two well isolated wires. The third box of weight 19kg, contains six batteries of 20 Amp-hours, capable of making the coil working for 4 consecutive hours. Thanks to the low weight, the high power and the relative compactness, this equipment deserve to be quoted among the improvements of this type of apparatus*". (Description of E. Dupont : Médecin de Bataillon .Arch. Méd Belg 1905, 1:317-319.).

Another installation dating from 1907 was offered by the Friends of the Museum. This widely-distributed "Art-Nouveau" model, elaborated by A. J. D'Arsonval, (France, 1851-1940) and manufactured by G. Gaiffe (France 1857-1943).



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