

# CampusInsight

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“Good management is inconspicuous management”

PROFESSOR MARK WAER ELECTED NEW RECTOR OF K.U.LEUVEN

KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT  
**LEUVEN**

LUDO MEYVIS

On 8 May, Professor Mark WAER (*centre*) was elected to the office of rector of K.U.Leuven. As the vice-rector for Biomedical Sciences, he had already been a member of the previous rector's (*Marc Vervenne, to Waer's left*) team. As always, the announcement of the new rector drew quite some media attention, but in his new function Professor Waer doesn't intend to place himself in the spotlight constantly. Fortunately, he made an exception for *Campus Insight*.

“In the past four years, I have watched a management culture develop in many healthy ways,” Waer says. “There is a great deal more openness and more appreciation for the individual; call it more ‘warmth’. More attention is also being paid to the societal relevance of what we do here, but also to our interdisciplinary approach. These are trends I would certainly like to maintain and strengthen. However, I would also like to rectify a number of unclear aspects in the management structure. Work has already begun in this area, but there is a great deal still to do.”

“I would also like to implement changes in certain aspects of the institutional culture. For example, I get somewhat annoyed by unhygienic meetings. What I mean by this is that there are too many meetings, that they take too long, that they often take place at very in-

convenient times and especially, that they do not always produce the desired results. A recent satisfaction survey also indicated that the tension between the professional lives and the personal lives of staff members is a pressing issue. I would like to do something about this; by having fewer and more productive meetings, for example. Why should we not implement a meeting-free day for example? Or why should we insist on always holding important meetings on Mondays, forcing the participants to prepare for them during the weekend?”

“Dissatisfaction is also stimulated by excessive administrative responsibilities. We strive for zero tolerance and no risk in our work, and supposedly this should be safeguarded by a rigid administrative framework. To be honest, I do not completely agree with this approach. Do not misunderstand me, I do not mean to

suggest that we should just adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude, on the contrary. I advocate the strictest quality control for the things that really count, but not for everything. If, in a hospital, you are confronted with a situation in which lives might be endangered, you must put in a great deal of very hard work to solve the problem, endeavouring to ensure the highest possible quality. But should one apply the same standards to the purchase of a few plastic files? We must learn to prioritise again, instead of trying to regulate and optimise everything.”

“Many of the problems are the result of deficient communication. Generally speaking, there are four layers in an organisation such as K.U.Leuven. There are the people who do the work, teach, conduct research, provide clinical care, etc.; the ground floor let's say. The second layer consists of people who provide targeted, local support; secretaries' offices and technical services, for example. Then there are the general services, which provide organisation-wide systems. In the fourth place there is the management layer. Communication between these four layers does not always operate as it should.”

“Why shouldn't we establish an Administration Council, whose job it would be to tackle the biggest problems with respect to the excessive administrative workload? I repeat, I am not arguing in favour of an ill-considered dismantling of the structure we have now. I am arguing for a more selective approach to our administration. A simple example: why should each and every expense be documented down to the last cent? Would it not make more sense to carry out spot-checks, to develop procedures whereby that last cent can be documented rather than that it *must* be documented?”

“Imperfection is part of life, perfection is not. You might have a good employee, but the next day you might find a better one and an even better one the day after that. Should you give each successive employee their notice? This approach would cause enormous problems on the level of continuity and stability. Such an untenable urge for perfection would also compromise loyalty, and that is one of our university's strongest points: attention to and involvement in the university as a whole.”

*“Increasing the mobility of students and professors will guarantee varied programmes and the formation of open and critical minds.”*

RECTOR MARK WAER

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Immunotherapy research shifts into higher gear thanks to FIRST US FUND

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'Master of passions' ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN opens Leuven's new Museum M

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Leuven organises the world's first conference about the ECONOMY OF BEER

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# “We must turn the fatalism into hope”

FIRST US FUND FINANCES RESEARCH INTO BRAIN TUMOURS

BENEDICT VANCLOOSTER

The JAMES E. KEARNEY MEMORIAL FUND for research into brain tumours is the first fund that is being financed by capital from the United States. Megan and Kathleen KEARNEY, James’ sisters, travelled to Leuven for the inauguration of the fund on 25 June.

Megan told us how the discovery of a brain tumour turned her brother’s life upside down seven years ago. “James used to run ten miles every morning before he went to work, as a banker on Wall Street. He was training for the New York marathon. During one of his training sessions, he suddenly lost his balance. Doctors at the emergency department discovered the cause: a malignant brain tumour. It was James’ 26th birthday.”

The young man lost his job, his apartment and his future. “He didn’t give up hope though”, Megan tells us. “He re-enrolled at Columbia University and spent twelve hours a day in the library reading medical articles about the causes and treatment of brain tumours. He visited research centres across the US and eventually came into contact with Professor Stefaan VAN GOOL in Leuven, via his oncologist in New York.”

Van Gool’s team currently treats patients from sixteen different countries, but James Kearney was his first American patient with a brain tumour. Van Gool: “James and his family always felt very welcome at our hospital, though

ultimately, James’ story did not end happily. James placed infinite trust in immunotherapy, despite the fact that it was still a very recent method of treatment.”

James shared the vision that where a number of tumours are concerned, including some brain tumours, classical oncological therapies fall short. “We will never be able to do without surgery, radio and chemotherapy, but they are insufficient”, Van Gool tells us. He is exploring an additional method of treatment: immunotherapy. “We have sufficient evidence to indicate that the body can actually combat some brain tumours with its immune system. Using this method, we have kept some relapsed patients alive for over five years and counting.”

Van Gool’s challenge is to provide convincing evidence that immunotherapy has additional value. “Our method is unique in Europe, but it is reassuring that our work is currently being reproduced by research centres in Japan and America. We have reached the point where we should be organising large-scale randomised studies to compare, for example, one hundred



The inauguration of the fund. From left to right, starting second from the left: Kathleen Kearney, Megan Kearney, then-rector Marc Vervenne and Professor Stefaan Van Gool. (© Rob Stevens)

patients who receive our treatment with one hundred patients who don’t.”

The scientific development is slow, but thanks to the James E. Kearney Memorial Fund, it will be able to shift into a higher gear. “Usually, our research always gets lost between two poles, with respect to financing”, Van Gool says. “Money either goes to basic science or to clinical applications. We work in the grey zone in between the two: experimental therapy. We have already advanced a great deal thanks to the financing from the Olivia Hendrickx Research Fund and the TBM-programme of the Flemish Government, but the new fund will enable us to take the next big step.”

The Kearney family intends to organise activities on a regular basis, to continually increase the fund’s resources. Despite the fact that malignant brain tumours only affect three or four out of 100,000 adults per year, their social impact is

enormous. “The number of years a patient loses as a result of a brain tumour, relative to the average life expectancy, is higher than in cases of any other cancer”, Van Gool informs us.

“Consider also that research financing for brain tumours is lower than for any other tumours. From this perspective, it seems as though the battle against brain tumours has been lost before it has even begun. The fund will help to turn this fatalism into hope and to really commit to the problem with James’ conviction and determination.” Or to put it in James’ own words, on the last card he sent for Mother’s Day: “Remember, beauty is in the struggle, not in the outcome.”

For more information

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## Environment

# A realistic approach to sustainability

NEW RESEARCH CENTRE CLUSTERS EXPERTISE

TINE BERGEN

By 2050, approximately 9 billion people will inhabit the Earth. How can we guarantee that they will all live in acceptable circumstances without our planet suffering the consequences?

It is to questions such as these that the brand-new Leuven Sustainable Earth Research Centre (LSUE) endeavours to provide an answer. Professor Gerard GOVERS coordinates the centre: “Much research concerning sustainability has already been done; it is an extremely topical issue. Through LSUE, we aim to bring together people who research sustainability in different fields; from science and technology to the humanities. The interaction between these various groups will enable us to create more opportunities for high-quality research.”

“Flanders is actually a heavenly place. We are close to the sea, have fertile ground, a stable climate and are faced with very few problems resulting from natural disasters. This is relatively unique; there are very few areas in the world where all these elements are combined. However, all these benefits will not necessarily ensure that nothing will change here. All the predictions indicate that the Mediterranean region will dry out considerably in the next forty years, linked to great population

growth. If we think this will not impact us, we are fooling ourselves.”

“Moreover, global agriculture will face enormous challenges in the next forty years. At the moment, each person has a piece of land measuring fifty metres by fifty metres at his/her disposal. This is not very much and of course not all of it is fertile Belgian land. In forty years’ time, this piece of land will have shrunk to half the size, as a result of the fact that the world population will increase by three billion. There are already six and a half billion people living on the Earth at the moment. Thus, it is extremely important that we analyse what to expect and that we strive to develop technological advancements that enable us to prepare for the changes.”

“You cannot solve a problem without considering the consequences of the solution on a broader social scale. One of my personal top priorities is that we drastically reduce the amount that we fish the oceans. The problem is that we do not see the damage we do there. If we were to have inflicted the same damage on land as we are doing in the oceans, we would have raised the alarm long ago. On the other hand, we must also consider that fish is the most important source of protein for one third of the world’s population. Where are all these people to find their protein if not from fish? Should we drastically increase global meat production?”

“Another example is one of the solutions posited to combat global warming: the stimulation of algae, which absorb the carbon in the atmosphere. Algae are composed of various substances and one of these, iron, absorbs carbon. It was argued that if we were to add more iron to the water, more algae would grow. In reality, however, nothing changed in the long term because the extra algae were eaten as fast as they grew.”

“In the search for viable solutions, we must always keep a keen eye on the possible implications those solutions may have. This demands research that is constantly developing and updating because we cannot experiment. We cannot say: let things heat up for a century to see what might happen.”

“We cannot sustain our society for the next fifty years with the energy sources we have at our disposal at the moment. This does not mean that the situation is entirely hopeless though. For example, in one day the sun produces more solar power than we can use in one year. What we need are enormous technological changes that make the use of that energy possible. This will also require huge social changes as well.”

“We mustn’t expect this to go smoothly. We are inclined to



wait until disaster strikes before we realise we need to steer a different course. On the basis of thorough research, we can make fairly accurate predictions of how the Earth will react. How human beings will react is another matter entirely. That is why I argue in favour of the debate becoming more scientific and distancing it from the emotional arguments that are often still used.”

“At the Centre, we hope to be able to present the bare facts of the situation and the possible solutions. Acknowledging that a great deal needs to change does not necessarily imply that we should be pessimistic about the eventual results.”

Online

<http://www.kuleuven.be/lsue/index.html>