

Child Neurology

12

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In 1968, Droogleever Fortuyn, professor of Neurology at the University of Groningen, supported by his colleagues Biemond (University of Amsterdam) and Sillevius Smitt (University of Utrecht), took the initiative to start a section of Child Neurology as a special field of interest of the Netherlands Society of Psychiatry and Neurology. The first meeting was held in October 1969 in Amsterdam.

This initiative allowed three young specialists, Cobus Willemse (Neurology, Utrecht), Paul Fleury (Neurology, Amsterdam) and Peek Le Coultre (Neurology, Groningen) to present themselves as the delegates of the Dutch Child Neurology Section at the 7th Oxford Meeting of the Spastic Society of Great Britain (1970).

The Oxford Meetings had their origin in the Study Group of the Medical and Information Unit of the Spastic Society of Great Britain. In 1958 the president of this study group, the pediatrician Ronald Mac Keith (1908-1977) from London, was a prominent advocate of a subspeciality of Child Neurology. At the 7th Oxford Meeting, the Oxford Study Group was transformed into the European Study Group on Child Neurology and Cerebral Palsy, which subsequently became the European Federation of Child Neurology Societies (EFCNS). Within the organisation of the EFCNS, Dutch childneurologists have played a prominent role. The biannual European congress of the EFCNS has been organised twice by the Dutch Child Neurology Society in the Netherlands (Noordwijkerhout, June 13-17, 1983, and Maastricht, October 8-11, 1997).

The International Child Neurology Association (ICNA) was established in 1973. During the first congress of the ICNA in Toronto (1975), the idea emerged to found a scientific society that accepted neurologists as well as pediatricians as members. The idea implied that the Section of Child Neurology, being a non-autonomous body within the Netherlands Society of Neurology, had to be replaced by a new and autonomous organisation. Such a proposition was forwarded at the autumn scientific meeting of the Section in Nijmegen and carried by the majority of the members. After years of preparation by Paul Fleury, Peter Barth, Boudewijn Peters and Christa Loonen, and many years of discussion with the Board of the Netherlands Society of Neurology, the Dutch Child Neurology Society was officially founded in 1980. The first president was professor Willemse (Utrecht). The first mission of the new society was to give the new organisation a large and independent financial basis. To implement that, any medical and non-medical person working in healthcare offices for infants and children and interested in childneurology, could become a member of the society, but only full-time active childneurologists could be a member of the board. In 2000, the Dutch Child Neurology Society had 290 members.

After a dynamic start of child neurology departments in the university hospitals of Utrecht, Nijmegen and Groningen, other such departments followed in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Leiden and Maastricht. In 2000, each Dutch university hospital commanded a childneurology department and two to four members of staff. In the last decennium, most of these departments, which started in the departments of Neurology, have been integrated in the departments of Pediatrics.

A milestone in the profile of the new section of Child Neurology was the organisation of a two-day course on child neurology (Boerhaavecursus over Kinderneurologie, Leiden, May 25-26, 1972), at which the most important aspects of the pathology of the developing central and peripheral nervous system were presented. The course was a resounding success (there were 464 participants) and resulted in a handbook on child neurology (Willemse 1973). In subsequent years, the Dutch Society of Child Neurology organised many symposia and training sessions.

From the beginning, Willemse invited the members of the Section to his department in Utrecht once a month. These so called 'tea club' meetings were a forum for the presentation and discussion of exceptional cases or cases pro diagnosi.

Every year since 1973, an autumnal symposium is organised by one of the university child neurology departments. The theme of the symposium is generally determined by the research interest of the organising department. Since the 1980s, two meetings have been organised each year: one the autumnal symposium with a predominantly educational aspect; the other a springtime meeting in a regional general hospital where case reports and results of scientific research by members of the Society are presented and discussed.

An annual training course (Cursorium) for residents in neurology or pediatrics was initiated in 1995 in order to stimulate their interest in child neurology and to promote cooperation between the two disciplines in an early phase of their training.

The Cornelia de Lange prize was instituted in 1992. Cornelia Catharina de Lange (1871-1950) was professor in Pediatrics at the University of Amsterdam and had a particular interest in diseases of the central nervous system. The prize is awarded to child neurologists who achieve outstanding merits in child neurology.

Child neurology versus neuropediatrics

In the Netherlands, child neurology is a discipline, practised in the majority of the cases, by neurologists with a special interest in child neurology and neuropathology. In many other countries, pediatricians constitute the majority and call themselves 'neuropediatricians'. The first generation members of the Dutch Child Neurology Society were the neurologists Cobus Willemse and Jaap Troost (Utrecht), Peek Le Coultre and Ko Begeer (Groningen), Christa Loonen (Rotterdam), Fons Gabriëls and Willy Renier (Nijmegen), Boudewijn Peters (Leiden), Paul Fleury and Charles Njiokikien (Amsterdam) and Wim Feikema (Rotterdam, later Deventer), and the pediatricians Peter Barth (Amsterdam) and Nan Krijgsman (Nijmegen).

The pioneers of the first period intended to make child neurology an officially recognised (sub-) specialism in the Netherlands with scientific input from both neurology and pediatrics. For many years, neither the Society of Neurology nor the Society of Pediatrics was willing to accept this proposition. The board of the Society of Pediatrics was unwilling to accept that non-pediatricians should take care of children. Because approximately one third of the patients in pediatric departments are children with neurological signs and symptoms, the first child neurology departments in Utrecht, Nijmegen and Amsterdam were perceived as a dangerous development. The situation in Nijmegen was illustrative of the turf battle between the two mother disciplines. At the University Hospital Nijmegen, there were two departments, a child neurology department at the Institute of Neurology and a neuropediatric department at the Institute of Pediatrics. In 1977 Gabrëels and Renier wrote a letter proposing a fusion of the two departments, however, this proposal met with a rebuttal by the heads of both Institutes. It was 1986 before the idea to create one unit could be realised, and even then it needed the prior concession of the Institute of Neurology to accept that the interdisciplinary unit would reside in the Pediatric Clinic and that the chair of Child Neurology of the Institute of Neurology would be disconnected from its foster mother. At the national level, it took even longer to reach consensus between the boards of the Society of Neurology and the Society of Pediatrics for a generally accepted training schedule for childneurology. In 2000, 25 years after the start of the Dutch Society of Child Neurology, an agreement was signed by the two societies. However, child neurology is not a separate subspecialty but a field of interest of both disciplines. This agreement is in accordance with the international discussion and consensus: a neurologist or a pediatrician can be recognised as a childneurologist or neuropediatrician if he/she has been trained during one year in pediatrics or neurology, respectively, and during one year in a recognised centre of child neurology. The performance and interpretation of neurophysiological examinations, particularly electroencephalograms, remain the domain of neurologists in the Netherlands.

The discussion of the relationship 'child neurology versus neuropediatrics' is not restricted to the Netherlands. At the Xth International Congress of Neurology in Barcelona (September 12, 1973), the International Child Neurology Association (ICNA) was established. Ingrid Gamstorp (Sweden) was the first secretary general. Sabine Pelc, a Belgian childneurologist, was responsible for the registration of the articles of the association in accordance with the Belgian law. In her report of the General Meeting of ICNA in Amsterdam (September 17, 1977), Ingrid Gamstorp pointed out that Sabine Pelc was worried by "the dominance of pediatrics in the training in neuropediatrics in many countries. She fears a majority of not properly neurologically trained members ruling ICNA." In 1979, however, one of the pioneers of the Dutch Child Neurology Society, the neurologist Peek Le Coultre, became president of the ICNA.

Epilogue

In the last decennium, the interest of Dutch pediatricians in child neurology and disabilities associated with pathology of the nervous system has increased. More and more topics, which in the last 25 years have been the domain of child neurologists, have entered the visual fields of pediatricians again. Mental retardation and neurometabolic diseases are diagnosed more and more by pediatricians specialised in clinical genetics or metabolic disorders, respectively. In cases of hydrocephalus, spina bifida, brain tumour, cerebral vascular malformations or focal epilepsy, the neurosurgeon can frequently offer more therapeutic help than the childneurologist whose contribution is largely diagnostic. Rehabilitation of children occurs under the supervision of specialists in rehabilitation medicine. The borders between neurology and psychiatry in infants and children are vague. How the future of child neurology as an interdisciplinary discipline will evolve and to what extent neurologists will continue to contribute to developments remains to be seen. The words of Sabine Pelc still apply.

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