

Brave and bold in the battle against fake news and conspiracy theories

In Bruges, he got a pie and the word 'murderer' thrown in his face. On social media, people commented that it should have been a rock, a brick, or a bullet. Earlier, he and his family had to go into hiding for weeks because of death threats by a professional soldier. Welcome to the world of scientist and virologist Marc van Ranst, who will receive an honorary doctorate from Radboud University Nijmegen on October 17, 2023. We talk at the Gasthuisberg campus in Leuven, where he works.



Why the hatred and incessant threats?

Because Van Ranst rates science higher than gut feeling? During the covid pandemic, he preferred his searching ratio over unfounded 'opinion-itis'. In an uncertain, pandemic time, he keeps his back straight and continues to inform people based on scientific information and insights. More than enough reason for the centennial Radboud University to present him with an honorary doctorate.

A physician and a researcher

Marc van Ranst is a virologist. He studies the evolution of viruses. How do they develop, how do they evolve? Early in his career, he mainly analyzed the human papillomavirus (HPV) that can cause cervical cancer. He proved that the goodness or badness of this virus can be read from its sequence, its genetic code. This knowledge is still used today. After the discovery of the corona viruses, Van Ranst went to seek antivirals to protect against the virus, among other things. This already refers to his other, more clinical task, with patients at the core. Because in addition to being a researcher, Van Ranst is also head of all laboratories at the Gasthuisberg campus, where the Leuven Academic Hospital is located. In 2006, the Belgian government appointed him commissioner in charge of crisis management during an emerging pandemic. Already in 2009, people feared for such a pandemic with the swine flu, which fortunately turned out to be less dramatic. It would turn out to be a dress rehearsal for the 2020 SARS-Cov-2 outbreak; the covid pandemic.

There is no 'ideal number' when it comes to deaths

Were we adequately prepared for the covid pandemic, we ask Van Ranst when we speak to him at the Rega Institute in Leuven.

"There was a lot happening concerning pandemic preparedness, but the covid pandemic still managed to surprise us. Having no effective drugs against the virus, no good antivirals, that was a very weak spot in our defenses. Many research applications to develop these drugs had been rejected in the previous years. It was not a priority. The pandemic made it clear that we need a broad spectrum antiviral, a drug that works against multiple viruses. Of course, these things are expensive, but the cost of a pandemic is astronomical. Set against that, it is an excellent investment. The European Funding Agencies did kick off post pandemic initiatives, but as a 'veteran of a few smaller pandemics', I know that the interest usually wanes quickly as well. That would

be the organisational aspect of the answer. There is also a psychosocial element to it. That says: whatever we do, it will never be enough. There is no perfect preparation for a serious pandemic. Because it is never completely predictable. So you sometimes have to be somewhat pragmatic by necessity. Because even during a pandemic, the goalposts keep shifting. 'Well managed' is not a statement that fits a pandemic. There is no ideal number of deaths. Are there few, then it is said that the measures were far too strict. If there are (too) many deaths, then the response was too lax. The course of the pandemic also has its own dynamics. Those first few months are hell. You are partly in the dark. Everyone wants information, which is hardly available. At the same time, people welcome measures to deal with the pandemic. In the beginning, applause sounds and songs of praise are sung. But it never ends that way. The moment you are applauded, the knives of the guillotine are also already being sharpened. It never ends elegantly."

Against racism and xenophobia

For Van Ranst, informing and educating has always been an inseparable part of his profession. "I'm quite proud of that", he says. Earlier in his career, he received the Career Prize in Science Communication from the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium. He also wrote a number of children's books about viruses and vaccination that are doing well. They have now been translated in eight countries, most recently in South Korea. Van Ranst has also been a regular and welcome guest on television and in the media for many years, informing and interpreting when it comes to viruses, vaccines, health and disease.

In doing so, he also lets his human and social character speak. Because as far as he is concerned, a virologist does not have to stick to viruses. On the contrary. "I have - even when there was no social media - always spoken out against racism and xenophobia. Always. And very consistently. Also during the pandemic. In Belgium, a quarter of the population votes far-right. Which is not to say they are all racists. But at least that they don't mind racism, otherwise they wouldn't vote for it. You may, no, you should take a stand against that. You don't have to be a virologist to do so. That is just as much the role of the piano tuner, the cop and the high school teacher. It's just part of what you stand for as a human being. People have never been able to convince me not to do it. This has probably also created 'antibodies' in people who disagree, and this, I accept."

I have always spoken out against racism and xenophobia

Keep calling out fake news and nonsense

They were very vicious and even life-threatening “antibodies” that developed in some people during the covid pandemic. Take the threat by Belgian soldier Jürgen Conings. On May 17, 2021, he stole heavy weapons from the barracks in Leopoldsborg and later that day posted himself near Van Ranst’s home for several hours. The virologist and his family were housed in a safehouse where they stayed for weeks until Conings was found lifeless near Maasmechelen on June 20. Take dance teacher Willem Engel and several others who filed lawsuits and whose followers bombarded Van Ranst via social media with conspiracy theories, false accusations and threats. Van Ranst won all five lawsuits filed against him, but it was a hefty drain on his time and belief in fairly debating opponents. After that, social media just continued to facilitate the continuous stream of mostly anonymous slurs and attacks. Continuing to respond to them is exhausting, but Van Ranst won’t let it slide.

“You have to keep speaking up against them! Otherwise, people get the idea that fake news spreaders are the majority, and that they’re right. That’s also why it is not wise to debate them at Op1, for example. That’s not a measured debate. The viewer quickly thinks that the truth will lie somewhere in the middle, but it is not in the middle! Not at all! That’s why you do have

to respond on social media, because otherwise you give your entire social media field to “the wappies” [sometimes referred to as ‘Covidiot’, Ed.]. And by wappies, I do not mean the doubting citizens, nor the unvaccinated ones. Wappies are those who spread nonsense. If nonsense is just that, you should name it that way. For those who doubt, you have to continue to point out and name that nonsense. But those who are determined, you’ll never persuade. To them, it has become a religion. Just try and make someone change their belief system, it’s a nearly impossible process.”

Vaccinating against nonsense

Is there a vaccine against blatant nonsense and conspiracy theories?

“Yes there is! That’s what we call education! If we explain the scientific method more in schools, people would better understand that there is such a thing as advancing insight. That is completely gone. Politicians know that phenomenon well. When they change their mind once, they are wind vanes, they have no backbone, they are unreliable. People are bullish on politicians. Whereas scientists are professional mind-changers. If new data comes along, you adjust your ideas accordingly. That is very poorly understood and we could explain that better. Also the understanding of numbers and statistics is often poorly developed. So it is both about being unnumerate and illiterate.

Radboud University on the awarding of the honorary doctorate: Marc Van Ranst gained international fame during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which he was one of the Belgian government’s key advisors. In addition to his scientific work, he tirelessly interprets current events, through social media and newspapers, on radio and TV. Van Ranst deserves the honorary doctorate because of his courageous role in propagating science-based advice and positions during the corona crisis. This makes him an important example of a committed scientist who has a “significant impact. He is a figurehead for science. His courage is evident in his boldness, steadfastness and perseverance, even despite threats and fierce criticism from corona skeptics.

In Belgium, deteriorating reading skills are a hot topic. If people develop less reading skills, it is easier to start reading things that are not there, you are more likely to fall prey to anyone who gives an explanation that seems attractive. People begin to believe that there are alternative truths. This is very dangerous, because the online world is not separate from the physical world. The day after Conings stood in front of my house, you got groups on Facebook and Telegram of more than 50,000 people who supported him and thought he was a folk hero and praised his goal - to kill me. 50,000 people endorsing that it should be done! That surprised me immensely and it moved me. As long as you have enough people whose heads are being talked mad, eventually there may be one who wants to do a ‘good deed’. Who is going to shoot a gynaecologist in front of the abortion clinic. Individuals and political parties that promote such things and call for tribunals and massacres are not without responsibility.”

Support from a broad group of people

The honorary doctorate from Radboud University is his third in the Netherlands, after two from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Leiden University. “Something like this happens to you, but I appreciate it immensely. This also helps my parents tremendously. My father follows everything, reads all those negative things unfortunately, sends me things. Sometimes he thinks the whole world is mad at his son, but it’s not. He was a teacher, then an inspector and always very involved with education. I come from a warm family where learning was important. I was taught by my grandparents that ordinary is good enough. My grandfather was a metal worker and when I speak in the media, I aim at him. Not using overly expensive words, he should be able to understand what I am saying.

I am also well aware that this honorary doctorate also stands for a much broader group of people who defend science against fake news and alternative truths. I am

not only talking about virologists like Marion Koopmans and other colleagues in Belgium, the Netherlands and beyond, but also, for example, about science communication and science journalism. I also see the honorary doctorate as a gesture to everyone who tirelessly kept explaining what we knew and what we didn’t know and how to interpret it. Moreover, there were people who gained a great deal of knowledge through coursework during the pandemic and made good contributions to the discussion. The role of these citizen scientists should not be underestimated. At all these levels, antidotes to the nonsense have been brewing. So yes, I very much appreciate this honorary doctorate. I appreciate it as support for my parents and support from the scientific community. It’s good to experience that it does exist on a broad front.”

You don’t have to be a virologist to take a stand, it’s just something you stand for as a human being.