



## Profile

### Guy T'Sjoen: collaborating to improve transgender wellbeing



Hormonal treatment for gender dysphoria—distress due to disparity between a person's gender identity and their assigned sex at birth—is only now being accepted as mainstream medicine. Indeed, acceptance is still not universal and transgender people continue to experience discrimination. Guy T'Sjoen is a leading researcher in transgender medicine, focussing on the endocrine aspects of treatment.

T'Sjoen holds several positions at the University of Ghent, Belgium: Clinical Staff Physician in the Department of Endocrinology, Head of Department of the Centre for Sexology and Gender, Head of the Department of Endocrinology, and Professor of Endocrinology. T'Sjoen first encountered the transgender topic just after high school when he saw a film directed by Pedro Almodóvar called *Law of Desire*. One of the characters happened to be transgender, but this was incidental to the plot. "I thought the topic was intriguing, but also very logical—just a normal variation of human being", he says. Later, when T'Sjoen met a transgender patient during his medical training, he was struck by her challenges. "Society's attitudes were not as they are now; the laws around transition and gender identity were stricter and availability of care low", he explains. T'Sjoen was motivated to explore the existing literature on endocrinology in transgender people, which he found to be very limited, and also to visit one of the leading transgender clinics of that time—at the Free University Hospital in Amsterdam, led by Professor Louis Gooren.

Ghent had a gender clinic from 1986, but patient numbers remained low up until T'Sjoen started around the year 2000, when about 20 transgender people per year started hormone treatment. After his time in Amsterdam, T'Sjoen realised that an audit of the existing transgender patients could be useful. The team recalled around 50 patients and asked them to complete questionnaires. They also did blood tests, and measured bone density. This initial audit uncovered huge variability in hormonal treatments used in transition protocols. Therefore, T'Sjoen and his colleagues in other disciplines (especially psychiatry) contacted teams at other centres who were also working with transgender patients to produce a standardised protocol. This collaboration led to the formation of the European Network for the Investigation of Gender Incongruence (ENIGI) study to evaluate, in its endocrine part, clinical outcomes and investigate side effects of cross-sex hormonal treatment in transgender people. "I realised that to move away from experience-based treatment towards evidence-based medicine we needed to study larger groups of patients—my dream was to have a study with more than 100 participants. But we now have four times that number at our centre

alone, and studies now have around 2500 participants, so we have larger studies than I ever imagined", says T'Sjoen.

Jean-Marc Kaufman, Emeritus Professor and the preceding Head of the Department of Endocrinology at the University of Ghent, has known T'Sjoen from early in his career. T'Sjoen originally started his research career under Kaufman studying testosterone in ageing male patients. However, T'Sjoen could see that his interest in transgender medicine could also fit well within the department, and Kaufman agreed that the topic was both interesting and understudied, so T'Sjoen was encouraged to pursue research in his preferred topic. "Clever, highly organised, and purposeful, it was clear as a young physician and clinical researcher that he had a vision and a plan", says Kaufman. Collaboration with colleagues from different medical specialties and with international teams has been key to T'Sjoen's success as both a clinical manager and researcher. Kaufman explains: "Guy was fortunate to join an existing multidisciplinary team in our institution of dedicated early pioneers in transgender medicine—including psychiatrists, plastic surgeons, urologists, and endocrinologists. Guy seizes opportunities offered to him; he took upon himself to optimise the endocrine care of transgender people in our clinic, systematically developed a successful program of clinical research to improve transgender endocrine care, and also gained insight into mechanisms of sex steroid action."

T'Sjoen speaks passionately about his desire to improve conditions for transgender people, not only taking care of clinical concerns but also advocating to improve rights and reduce stigmatisation. He co-founded the European Professional Association for Transgender Health (EPATH), of which he is also President, and Transgender Infopunt, an impartial, free, and anonymous Flemish information resource. Recently, T'Sjoen has made forays into television; on the Belgian show *Topdoctors* he has been able to use a public platform to communicate his work and normalise transgender people to the general public. He has also written Dutch-language books for the general reader: *Onder De Gordel* (Below the Belt, 2018; about male sexual health), *Transgenderzorg* (Transgender Care, 2013), *Het Transgender Boek* (The Transgender Book, 2019), and *Hormonen Onder Controle* (Hormones Under Control, 2020; on general endocrinology). Kaufman underlines T'Sjoen's work to improve the general wellbeing of transgender people: "He uses his excellent communicative abilities to lobby for improved formal and informal societal attitudes towards this minority. Guy, in his still young career, has made a big difference for transgender people."

Fiona Mitchell