

“Chained for three years”

This is not the headline of an article about the violation of human rights in Guantanamo Bay, the abuse of circus animals, an abducted child in Belgium or Austria or a reporter held by extremists in the middle of nowhere. This headline refers to Brandon Van Ingen, an 18-year old boy who has a mental disability combined with behavioural issues. The last three years until now he has been living in his room in an institution, chained to the wall with a harness, like the one people use for toddlers or dogs. He stays in his room 24 hours a day without even having the possibility of opening a window. Because of his unpredictable aggressive rages, the institution he lives in, thought this was the only way to 'handle' him.

Brandon's caretaker describes his behavioural psychiatric problems as follows:

“Brandon has two voices in his head which constantly tell him what to do but they never agree. One voice tells him to say obscene things, think about sex, bully others, call them names, fight, hit, kick, spit, bite, run away and destroy things, even things he likes and loves”
The other voice says:

“Stop it Brandon! Don't look at the buttocks and breasts of girls in the street, don't yell dirty things to those girls or to the caretakers, don't fight, don't run away, don't kick! Stay calm! Stay calm!!!”

Brandon himself explains his behavioural psychiatric problems as follows:

“And then I have to try not to do those nasty things and stay calm but a very big stress builds up in my belly that slowly creeps upwards and then I have to be very, very strong to prevent it from coming out. Then I almost go crazy and even if I don't want it, most of the times it escapes me.”

The doctors who observed him in an observation centre for children with psychiatric problems labelled him with the following terms: ADHD, PDD-NOS, psychiatric complaints, reactive attachment disorder, emotionally very limited, separation anxiety disorder, no perspective for the future.

It was an employee of the institution “s Heeren Loo” in Ermelo, The Netherlands, where Brandon has been living for three years, who could not grasp the situation any more and contacted the media. On the 18th of January 2011 the news magazine “Uitgesproken EO” (explicit EO) of the EO/Evangelische Omroep (Evangelical Broadcasting company) brought a documentary about Brandon, his disability and his living conditions for the past three years. The Netherlands and Belgium reared. Newspapers and politicians are perplexed by the program. They state to be shocked by the humiliating treatment of Brandon.

Other opinions appeared the following days. A Belgian father writes in “De Standaard” (a major Belgian newspaper) that he would like to live in The Netherlands with his mentally disabled daughter. In Belgium, people with a mental disability combined with behavioural or psychiatric problems fall through a crack in the health-care system. This is a result of the incomplete state reform in the health-care sector which divide the cases in: curative

medicine which is taken care by a federal (Belgian) authority and chronic care belongs to the regions (Flemish).

Because of umbrella politics, those people regularly lack the attention they need. The funds of the Flemish government destined to support and provide assistive technology for the disabled people are insufficient. Because of this the waiting lists of the institutions are long. So long that people with mental and behavioural problems are labelled as “difficult cases” and they are either not accepted or soon kicked out and replaced by “easier ones” with only a mental disability. Some of them now live at home or in psychiatric hospitals heavily sedated or isolated, and others live in prison out of necessity since they aren’t welcome anywhere else. The system is insufficient.

If Brandon was born in Belgium, his story probably would be different: he would live at home without the support he needs. If his parents were unable to take care of him, he would be on a waiting list for years, then moved from one institution to another and probably the endpoint of his journey would be in prison.

In reaction to Brandon's case many professionals and experts who deal with people with a mental disability and behavioural problems state that they handle things differently in their institution. Restraining is a temporarily solution and the last option. In general humiliating and inhumane treatment result in inhumane behaviour. The first step is to create trust and to find positive alternatives for destructive or aggressive habits. Of course this is not easy, and it takes much more time and energy than chaining someone to a wall.

In a follow up edition one week later, the same news magazine “Uitgesproken EO” shows examples of disabled people who used to be tied down on their bed 23 hours a day. But who now, because of another approach by their environment, live a free and happy life with the adequate support.

In Flanders the Flemish Care Inspection (Vlaamse Zorginspectie) monitors all external means of coercion. Only a psychiatric medical practitioner can oblige means of coercion.

The Dutch inspection stated that the Brandon's treatment was consistent with “the rules of justified care” after they paid the facility an unexpected visit. The court gave the institution permission to use restraining measures to the boy.

The Dutch Minister of State of Public Health, Marlies Veldhuijzen van Zanten-Hyllner personally visited Brandon and his mother. She reported that the institution followed the rules even though Brandon's treatment is not a desirable option to the care he needs and asks for.

During her visit, Brandon told her he sometimes wants to be chained to the wall. He says it is necessary to protect him from himself. He doesn’t want to destroy things any more. He puts the harness on every time someone will enter his room. Specialists explain that this is a reaction of someone who is used to be chained for so long that starts experiencing it as a feeling of security.

In two weeks time Brandon will be transferred to a new specially adapted accommodation: a residence without furniture in a separated building on the grounds of the same institution.

Hopefully the media attention and the political consternation will lead to something else for Brandon. The sad truth is that Brandon is not the only one living in such horrific conditions due to inappropriate support. Once again we see that professional care in institutions cannot offer the support needed. It is a real disgrace for prosperous countries like the Netherlands or Belgium that people are treated like criminals just because of their complex disability.