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UGhent distances itself from Belgian professor's comments on conspiracy talk show

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By **Maïthé Chini**



Professor Mattias Desmet and Alex Jones. Credit: Screenshot

The rector of Ghent University, Rik Van de Walle, has distanced himself from the statements made by UGhent professor Mattias Desmet on the talk show of American conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.

During the talk show, Desmet claimed that he saw "with [his] own eyes" how open-heart surgery was performed under hypnosis and without anaesthetic "in a university hospital in Belgium." Desmet subsequently admitted that he did not tell the truth and apologised in a long Facebook post.

Desmet is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at the UGent and wrote a popular book on mass formation. He has long been critical of certain measures taken by the government in the fight against Covid-19 and as a result has built up a large following – bringing him to the United States where he was previously also interviewed by the conservative Fox News channel.

Yet despite his popularity, his statements on Jones' talk show drew considerable criticism, including from Pepijn Van Erp, a mathematician and board member of Skepsis, a Dutch organisation that is very critical of pseudoscience.



He added that it is likely that Desmet read about such procedures performed by Dr Marie-Elisabeth Faymonville at the University hospital in Liège. "If he was an eyewitness to such an operation, he kept his eyes in his pockets."

Reacting to the statements on **VRT**, UGhent rector Rik Van de Walle called freedom of expression "a fundamental right" and said that "dismissal or other measures are not in order." Nonetheless, the rector felt the need "to state explicitly that the statements he made to a convicted conspiracy theorist in the US are purely his own."

Jones is a controversial, extreme right-wing American conspiracy theorist who was recently ordered to pay compensation of almost \$50 million to the families of the victims of the shooting at Sandy Hook, the primary school where a gunman shot dead 26 people in 2012. Jones claimed that the shooting never happened and that it was all staged.

'Giving the wrong impression'

"Those statements made by Desmet during the talk show have no link to either the UGhent as a whole or other UGhent staff. I would therefore like to personally and emphatically distance myself from his comments," said Van de Walle.

"Many scientists are correcting his statements and I welcome that. When inaccuracies are spread, it is important that scientists point them out."

In the meantime, **Desmet took to Facebook to apologise** for his statements: "I have to correct a wrong impression created by the interview... In the interview, I answer in the affirmative to Jones' question about whether I have seen such an operation: that is not true."

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"When Jones asked me if I had seen such open-heart surgery under hypnosis, I hesitated for a moment and then said 'Yes, absolutely', but that answer actually came in a kind of confusion," Desmet said. "What exactly did he mean? Seen on video or seen in real life?"

Desmet acknowledged the "mistake on my part" and expressed his desire "to correct it." He added that "we must have the courage to acknowledge our own mistakes."