

Dear participants, honoured guests,

As chairman of the Board of Directors of Royal Visio, it gives me great pleasure to say how proud we are to be hosting this sixth European Seminar of the Acquired Deafblindness Network in Groningen in the Netherlands.

Since some of you may not be familiar with Visio, I would first like to introduce the organisation.

Royal Visio is a national organisation that supports visually impaired and blind people in their desire to live, learn and work independently. We are involved in a joint venture with Sensis and De Brink designed to improve the quality of the programmes we offer.

Our care, education and rehabilitation services focus on helping people with a visual impairment, including those with multiple disabilities, dual sensory loss, and physical or mental impairments. We try to optimise their participation in society and their local community in accordance with their own expressed wishes.

It's only a small step from Visio's mission statement to the theme of this European Seminar: 'The art of communication: creating solutions at the individual, societal and organisational level in the world of acquired deafblindness'. The central theme of the seminar is closely related to the methodology we use at Visio.

Although my contribution to this opening ceremony is not meant to be a promotional tour or a TV commercial for my organisation, I can't resist giving you some inside information on where we work, how we work and how these relate to acquired deafblindness.

Visio, which can trace its origins back almost two hundred years, now has more than twenty specialist centres in the Netherlands, covering all areas from the north-east of the country down to the south-west. We help visually impaired and blind people to live, learn and work independently. But let me focus on the complicated field of acquired deafblindness.

Although the number of people with acquired deafblindness in the Netherlands is relatively small (we estimate about forty thousand people, including the elderly), this area is still one of Visio's primary fields of interest and is often pursued in close cooperation with colleagues from other centres.

To give you some examples:

- we recently changed our client registration system. As a result, the number of registered clients with dual sensory loss increased from 6% in 2004 to 9% in 2005. This has significantly reduced the risk of missing diagnoses;
- to make sure we share the knowledge in our professional work, we have developed a training programme for professionals who work with deafblind people. So far, we have trained 225 people. This is an ongoing process and we are currently developing a training programme for new groups of professionals;
- several pilot studies have been conducted to improve existing rehabilitation programmes and develop new ones;
- we have started a screening programme to detect people with multiple hearing and visual impairments;
- we have been running a pilot project on employment issues for people with dual sensory loss, with the aim of offering a career development programme;
- to ensure that project results are incorporated into Visio's everyday work, we have changed our organisational structure. Each Visio division now has a team and a manager responsible

for the quality and development of services for deafblind clients. The team can also call on specialist staff for help.

So many initiatives have been launched, but much still remains to be done. This is the start of a new challenge for the organisation in its pursuit of the best possible care for its deafblind clients.

As you will understand, the professionals are eager to start sharing the many interesting projects on deafblindness to be presented here. It is an honour to be hosting this sixth European Seminar of the Acquired Deafblindness Network in the Netherlands.

Although the ADBN organises seminars by and for the professionals who provide services for people with dual sensory loss, they were keen to include the clients themselves as far as possible. As a result of this commitment, you'll find that many of this seminar's speakers and workshop leaders have a dual sensory loss. For the theatre we also found a scriptwriter with dual sensory loss, and in the hall downstairs we have an exhibition of sculptures and paintings by artists with dual sensory loss. We hope their involvement will reinforce the emotional ties, the sharing experience and the discussion between the professionals and the people they help.

Looking at how this seminar has been organised, the commitment of all the speakers and participants, the content of the abstracts for the next four days, and the informal aspects of the programme, this sixth European Seminar promises to be the latest in a line of highly successful seminars held by this network.

And although it's early days yet, I would like to congratulate the organising committee and all the participating and contributing partners on the work they have put into this seminar.

On behalf of Visio I would like to wish you all a pleasant stay in the Netherlands and hope you all have a successful and inspiring seminar.